



Formerly, the Fallen Daughter of the Duke

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Ichibu Saki

Illustrated by Nemusuke

Character Designs by Ushio Shirotori





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Vik William Paffstant

16 years old

The Crown Prince of Paffuto, a larger country neighboring Noston. Vik is renowned even beyond the borders of his homeland for his wealth of intelligence and wit. However, in ordinary situations, Vik acts like any other boy his age.

Claire Martino

16 years old

The daughter of Duke Martino of Noston, descended from a bloodline famous for producing magically talented young women. Alas, Claire feels she has fallen from grace after failing to meet her family's expectations.



Keith Spencer

20 years old

Head of the royal guards and Vik's enduringly loyal retainer. Even while Keith's friends tease him for being too serious, they look up to him like an older brother.

Lui Clark

18 years old

A royal guard and one of Vik's retainers. While Lui appears to be a young man, she is actually the daughter of Earl Clark. Claire is her close friend and knows that she can always rely on Lui in a pinch.

Denis Wood

18 years old

A royal guard and one of Vik's retainers. Denis is friendly and easygoing enough to get along with anybody.

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Chapter 1

The setting sun poured in through the student council room windows, casting shadows across the floor of two people standing a few meters apart from one another. One shadow was of Duke Martino's daughter Claire, who could not hide the resignation in her eyes. The other shadow belonged to a young man with jet-black hair and light gray eyes, who looked down on her with contempt from where he stood. He was none other than the Crown Prince of Noston, Asbert Lucia Nottingham.

"Claire, I think it would be best if Salomon escorted you to tomorrow's graduation gala in my stead," he said.

Claire did not answer him. She'd already known this was coming, but even so, her response froze in her throat and refused to come out. The late afternoon sun beat down on her arms. It should have felt warm, but she only felt icy cold—too frozen to move, too frozen to speak. She had imagined this scene many times before, and the Claire in her imagination always put up a strong front so as not to act disgracefully, but her real reaction was the dead opposite.

She tried to force a reply, but her throat went dry. All she could muster was a tiny squeak.

"I've decided to take Charlotte to the gala," Asbert continued. "I would so hate to be rude to the Martino family, so I shall have Salomon accompany you. That is, if you are prepared to face your disgrace." His eyes were frigid, lacking any modicum of warmth; even his facial expression spat contempt at her.

Claire did not see herself reflected in Asbert's eyes. "Your Highness," she began, hesitating.

"I've said all I needed to," he curtly cut her off. "Now, if you will excuse me, Charlotte is waiting for me." He seemed to take her few choked-out words as acceptance, and before Claire could finish, Asbert turned on his heel and forcefully shoved the door open. He stalked out as if he had no more lingering affection for Claire.

Now left alone, she slumped onto the couch as all the strength drained from her body. "I knew this day would come," she murmured.

Tomorrow was to be the graduation ceremony for the Royal Aristocratic Academy. After the commencement itself, a lavish gala would be held for the students, their families, and the nobility. It was to be an important day, not only for the graduating students but also for the other adolescent children of nobility, who would use the opportunity to make themselves known and validate their status in high society. Each student was to be accompanied by their betrothed. In Claire's case, this would have been her fiancé up until a few minutes ago; however, the crown prince, Asbert, had denied her the pleasure of his company and declared, albeit unofficially, the imminent de facto end of their engagement.

Asbert and Claire had been fast friends all throughout childhood, but their relationship had cooled somewhere along the way. These past few months in particular had been especially frigid as Asbert ignored Claire in favor of spending time with other young noblewomen. Following Asbert's lead, the rest of his entourage chose to dismiss Claire as well, which had informed her of this moment's imminent arrival. At the very least, it was gentlemanly of him to break things off the day before the celebration and secure a new chaperone for her.

"Oh well," Claire told herself. "There isn't anything I can do about it now. I wasn't good enough for him, and that's all it comes down to." She resolved to accept the situation for what it was to prevent a blow to her self-esteem. Claire was well aware that she was not an appropriate match for the crown prince.

Sixteen years ago, the prestigious Martino family, distant relatives of the Crown, had welcomed their eldest daughter, Claire, into the world. Although her mother had passed away when she was a small child, Claire still had her kind father, two older brothers, and a younger sister, so she had never felt lonely. That is, until one year ago, at Claire's fateful baptism.

In the land of Noston, baptisms were held at the age of fifteen and consisted of forming an agreement with a spirit in order to gain magical abilities. Naturally, not everyone possessed a strong magical aptitude. One's lineage and

personal disposition determined the powers exhibited at the time of baptism. Girls born into the Martino family such as Claire had always received extraordinary magical powers and were destined from birth to serve their country. The eldest Martino daughter in particular frequently possessed strong abilities; looking back across history, most had achieved prominent positions of power, some as illustrious as high chancellor. Claire's older brothers were also expected to have bright futures ahead of them, but those paled before the expectations set for Claire. As she and the crown prince were born only a year apart, their betrothal was finalized when Claire was still in the womb. Not once had she considered the lack of freedom her position entailed. This was the path laid out for her by fate, one she could not stray from. She had simply accepted it as fact.

And then the day of her baptism arrived. With a crowd of nobility and the royal family looking on, Claire stepped into the fountain of holy water. In all the recorded history of the Martino family, the holy water had glowed either white or silver in relation to the strength of the girl's magical power. *Aunt Anne's turned white*, Claire thought, *and I heard Grandma Florence's was silver! Which color will I have?* Her heart pounded as she awaited the moment of truth.

Then, the world around her turned a pale pink. *Wait...what's this?* From strongest to weakest, the fountain represented magical powers with the colors silver, white, blue, light blue, light pink, red, orange, and yellow. Claire's color was light pink, which was three shades beneath the colors every other eldest daughter in the Martino family had received. There were plenty of people, including her older brothers, who could do no better than orange or yellow magic, and no one thought less of them. However, pink was a disappointment for all who expected Claire to achieve greater things.

It had startled Claire just how much everything changed for her after her baptism. Her normally kind brother Oscar turned mean. On the other hand, her other brother Leo, who typically viewed her as a rival even as he treated her with kindness, suddenly became unnaturally sweet. Most startling of all was her father, Benjamin, who began to refuse to bring her along on social calls or trips into town as though he wanted to hide even the fact that she existed. Claire, with her father's lineage and her mother's beauty, was supposed to be

Benjamin's pride and joy, but now he could no longer bear the judgmental eyes that viewed his daughter as the failure of the Martino family. His poorly calculated attempts at sparing her feelings only worsened her position as the so-called disgrace of the Martinos.

Ever since she was a child, Claire had loved accompanying her father into town, attending the theater with her brothers, and shopping for barrettes with her dear little sister. "Before my baptism, I should have an evening dress made for me specially to wear to the after-party," she had once said. Oh, those were sweet memories of the times before she had turned fifteen!

Now that her engagement with Asbert was essentially over, Claire turned her eyes to the view outside the window. The evening sun had completely vanished over the horizon, and Claire watched the backs of Asbert and his entourage as they returned to the dormitory in the deepening gloom.

Charlotte... Claire could see the girl in the middle of Asbert's group, her long, flowing hair fluttering over her shoulders and down her dainty back. Charlotte had been adopted by the Martinos when she was five and Claire was six. She was the daughter of Benjamin and his favorite mistress, a woman who lived a meager life in a rural village far from the capital. However, when Charlotte's mother had passed away due to illness, Charlotte had come to join her father's family as his youngest daughter. Such circumstances were not uncommon in the aristocracy, but as Charlotte was only a year apart in age from his wife's daughter and likewise possessed the Martino bloodline, this had caused quite a stir in high society. Tragically, Charlotte's arrival had occurred the year after Claire's mother had likewise passed away from an unforeseeable accident, so neither the Martino home nor society at large had been at all welcoming to poor little Charlotte.

Despite those adversities, Charlotte was such a sweet, well-behaved, and delightfully optimistic child that one by one, every member of the family—or to be more precise, every last person in the Martino mansion—had fallen in love with her. She took after her mother and so looked different from the rest of her siblings, yet with her flowing blonde hair, dainty frame, and doll-like eyes, anyone could see she was a true beauty as well.

"You're going to marry Prince Asbert, aren't you, Claire?" Charlotte had asked

once. “That means you’ll be a princess. How dreamy!” Her voice was as clear and delicate as a bell, lending her every word a charming honesty. To Claire, Charlotte was her dear sister, as simple as that—but Charlotte’s commoner background became a true sticking point for other aristocratic girls their age. Her lineage was often pointed out when the sisters attended tea parties together, resulting in Charlotte bawling and Claire standing up for her sister. Fortunately, by the time Charlotte had turned fifteen, no one in town treated her existence as a scandal any longer. *Everything’s okay now*, Claire thought. *And I’ll still stick up for Charlotte for as long as I live!*

The sisters’ relationship had begun to change two months ago at Charlotte’s baptism. Claire remembered that day as clearly as if it were yesterday. The event had taken place in the distant kingdom of Paffuto at the church in Charlotte’s mother’s hometown. The moment Charlotte’s foot touched the water, the fountain lit up the surrounding area with a brilliant flash of white light that was so blinding, Claire could not even open her eyes. The other onlookers all cried out as one, “It’s white! Wonderful job, Charlotte!”

Benjamin ran up to her and enveloped his younger daughter in a hug. Charlotte’s color had been, up until now, reserved for only the eldest daughters in the Martino family; it symbolized her noble lineage. Afterwards, the other aristocrats rushed in to congratulate her. One among them was the crown prince, Asbert. Claire watched in a daze as Charlotte smiled at the center of this scene that Claire herself had failed to achieve the year before.

In their excitement, the spectators forgot that Claire was even in attendance and whispered thoughtless remarks amongst themselves.

“I would imagine that now Prince Asbert will break off his engagement with Lady Claire and ask for Lady Charlotte’s hand instead. I would hardly shout it from the rooftops, but I hear those two are quite close at the Academy as well.”

“That Prince Asbert attended her baptism, even though she is only a second daughter, speaks volumes about his feelings for her, doesn’t it?”

After the ceremony, Charlotte’s monthly visits home from the Academy increased in frequency until they happened once a week. Her father and brothers began hosting weekly dinner or tea parties in order to introduce her to

high-ranking military officials or aristocrats. Claire was instructed to be Charlotte's chaperone on each occasion. Everyone Benjamin introduced Charlotte to was a former acquaintance of Claire's. Once, Claire had been the esteemed fiancée to the crown prince, but now her whole world had been flipped upside down. Now whenever Charlotte walked into a room at a dinner party, everyone invariably turned green with envy at Charlotte but only looked upon Claire with pity. Moreover, immediately following her baptism, Benjamin began seating Charlotte, not Claire, next to Asbert. Perhaps due to being fond of Charlotte like a little sister, Asbert himself had not been entirely opposed to the idea.

At first, Charlotte had protested. "He's Claire's fiancé," she had said. "Why are you doing this? It isn't right!" Yet after two months, she seated herself at Asbert's side as naturally as if she had always belonged there.

Claire had become a wallflower with a permanent smile plastered on her face. *Someone, please set me free*, she pleaded with all her heart, waiting for that day to come.

Claire lingered in the school building so she wouldn't bump into Asbert's friends or Charlotte on the way back. By the time she returned to the dorm, it was pitch-black outside. She lit a lamp and opened the closet door with a clatter. Claire lugged out the biggest trunk she used only for her trips home, hauled it out to the middle of the floor, and opened it. She began choosing clothes suited for travel and piled them up on the bed. Dresses were no good; she wanted something more practical.

Just then, she heard a knock on her door.

"Who is it?" she called in as cheery a voice as she could muster. She didn't want to see anyone right now, but she tried to conceal her emotions as she went to the door.

"It's Charlotte, Claire. There's something I'd like to say." After a pause, Charlotte asked, "May I come in?"

Of all the people! Charlotte was second on the list, just behind Asbert, of people Claire did not want to see right now. She looked back over her shoulder

at the huge trunk in the center of the floor and the pile of clothes on the bed. *I don't want her to find out*, Claire thought.

"I'm sorry," she called back with a quick lie. "I just stepped out of the shower, and I'm not decent. Can we talk like this?"

A second voice that Claire recognized cut in from the other side of the door. "Lady Claire, we need to inspect the layout of your rooms."

"Is that you, Lady Caroline?" asked Claire.

"Yes, Lady Claire."

Caroline was the daughter of a count and in the same grade as Claire. She and Claire had been close friends since the first day of school but drifted apart once Charlotte also enrolled. The rest of Claire's friends had gradually followed suit after Charlotte's baptism. Sadly, the children of nobility frequently behaved in such a manner to seek out stronger connections for their families.

Caroline continued, "Prince Asbert commands that your room be used by Lady Charlotte starting tomorrow. If you'd like, we can come back later, but would you please make the time to let us see the rooms?"

Charlotte timidly added, "I do apologize. I told Prince Asbert I have no need of your rooms, but he insisted..."

Baffled by this sudden turn of events, Claire was at a loss for words.

Caroline addressed Charlotte sternly; Claire could hear her raised voice clearly through the door. "Lady Charlotte, *why* do you insist on apologizing to her? We are here to protect you, so we promise that you'll be fine." She then added, "Lady Claire! I understand how upsetting this must be for you, but it wouldn't hurt you to consider Lady Charlotte's feelings for once either! The poor thing doesn't deserve such terrible treatment, even if you two don't share the same mother."

"L-Lady Caroline!" Charlotte cried. "Please, you needn't bring that up here..."

Claire did not understand what Caroline was hinting at. "What is this terrible treatment you speak of, Lady Caroline?" she asked.

"You know full well what I mean!" Caroline snapped. Without so much as

pausing for breath, she heaped a deluge of accusations upon Claire. “I’ve heard it from Lady Charlotte herself plenty of times since she first enrolled at the Academy; you have abused and tyrannized her since she was a child! I could scarce believe you’d do something so wretched when you’ve always been kind to me, but now I understand your sudden fall from grace in your family. Is it not because your cruelty to Lady Charlotte has finally seen the light of day?”

Claire’s brain ground to a halt in shock. She had always endeavored to protect and take care of Charlotte; not once had she done anything that could have qualified as abuse. Claire was proud to say that she and her sister were as close as could be, so much so that the matter of their differing matrilineage was insignificant to the two of them. She hadn’t the faintest idea what Caroline was talking about.

“I apologize,” Claire said, barely disguising the shocked quaver in her voice, “but I’m afraid I don’t understand what you’re talking about.”

“You can’t hide it any longer, Lady Claire. Prince Asbert and all the members of the student council know the truth just as well as I. Thus far, Prince Asbert has protected Lady Charlotte by virtue of his presence, but His Highness is graduating tomorrow. He deemed it best to designate further protection for her before he leaves.”

What in the world does she mean? Claire wondered. “Charlotte, did you really tell them that I abused you?” It was all too sudden, too hard to believe.

“I-I’m sorry, Claire,” Charlotte mewled. “I didn’t plan to tell everyone, but it’s been so hard to bear.” Claire heard her sister dissolve into tears from the other side of the door.

Then Claire finally connected the dots. *This explains what happened earlier, she thought. That’s why Prince Albert was glaring at me. This explains everything. But it’s too late to clear up this terrible misunderstanding. Oh, sweet Charlotte, I thought we got along so well, but I see now that I was alone in that misconception! To you, I’ve been nothing more than a stepping stone on your path to the top.*

Claire tasted iron; she must have bitten her lip without realizing.

“Very well, I understand,” she said. She kept her voice perfectly ladylike to

disguise the tremor in it. “I will show you both my rooms, but not now. After dinner, please.”

Once she heard Caroline and Charlotte leave, Claire rushed to the trunk spread out in the middle of the floor. “I have no time,” she told herself.

Claire’s rooms occupied the best spot on the south side of the girls’ dormitory. Her suite possessed a living room, a bedroom, a spacious balcony, and a small kitchen. It had been granted to her because of her status not only as a duke’s daughter, but also as the crown prince’s fiancée.

Prince Asbert graduates tomorrow, she thought as she quickly packed her trunk. And I imagine that at the gala afterwards, the prince will announce his engagement to Charlotte before the student body. According to the guest list in the student council room, the king and his cabinet ministers will be in attendance as well. Before breaking his engagement with me, he must have already had my father’s permission. He must think I intend to hurt Charlotte—to the extent that he feels the need to openly pledge the royal family’s support for her in order to keep her safe from me!

Words could not adequately express the peculiar emotion—not quite heartache, not quite anger—that bristled within Claire. *This must have been the disgrace Prince Asbert mentioned in the student council room*, she thought.

“I need neither Noston nor the Martino family any longer,” Claire said to herself, acknowledging that the crumbling cornerstone on which she had built her life had already been destroyed. In times past, it had been imperative that Claire show weakness to no one. She was always playing the sweet, gentle lady whose eternal smile brightened the very kingdom. Her sense of pride in those morals she had striven to uphold for as long as she could recall was nothing but a fantasy, a fabricated lie.

Claire sat in front of her vanity and looked at the familiar face reflected in the mirror. She grabbed hold of hair that once, long before she had enrolled in the Royal Aristocratic Academy, had been praised by Prince Asbert for its lovely brown color, a rich shade not unlike black tea with milk. Even Charlotte had envied Claire’s smooth, straight hair.

She began to snip, tentatively at first, but then faster and faster. With her

scissors, Claire cut that beautiful hair to just above her shoulders. Its length had been proof of her status as a high lady, but she needed it no longer.

Next, Claire changed into the outfit she had deemed easiest to move in: a simple one-piece dress and a pair of boots. She tidied up the hair that had fallen to the floor, made the bed, and packed away the many things she could not take with her into a box. "Perhaps Charlotte will send these things home to the mansion if I leave them here," she said. *Whether or not father accepts them since he probably believes I hurt Charlotte is another story.* She snickered self-deprecatingly under her breath.

Picking up her trunk, Claire went out to the emergency staircase on her balcony. Not once did she look back at the rooms she had lived in for two years now. *My memories of this place aren't sweet enough to indulge in that level of sentimentality,* she thought. Claire's heart should have been thundering in terror, but as the gentle night breeze brushed her cheek, she felt her formerly suppressed spirit finally blossom onto her determined face. Spring was just around the corner, and with that hopeful thought, the heavy trunk almost felt light in her arms.

Once past the Academy gates, Claire climbed on board the coach she had summoned to help carry her trunk. While she could leverage her magical abilities for certain protections, she was limited to only low-level charms. Claire had wanted to set off on her own two legs, so taking a coach this early on in the journey slightly peeved her. However, it was better to be safe than sorry in the darkness of nighttime, she reminded herself.

"I am terribly sorry for the sudden request," Claire said, "but I simply must be off to my villa at once. Could you please take me as far as the way station in Ias?"

"As you wish, Lady Claire," said one of the two coach drivers.

"I am sure your ladyship is already aware," said the other, "but we shall arrive at the Ias way station and change horses in two to three hours. Your ladyship should rest until then."

These were the very same drivers who conducted her coach on her trips

home from the Academy. In polite terms, the two paid little attention to the Academy students' capricious power dynamics; in frank terms, the two were ignorant to most current affairs. Therefore, Claire could count them among her few allies, two of the handful of people who still treated her kindly.

Thank goodness they're here, Claire thought to herself. *I can relax and let them handle the drive.* She sunk deep into the cushioned coach seats and soon experienced a wave of pleasant sleepiness. The coach slowly trundled away from the Academy, and its swaying finally rocked Claire to sleep.

Before she nodded off entirely, Claire murmured, "I really shouldn't fall asleep, but I should be safe with the two of them. And it's been so long since I've felt this drow...sy..."

She awoke after an indeterminate amount of time in an unfamiliar room. *Where is this place?* she thought. *Wait a minute; I recognize it.* The area was lit up like daytime by the fluorescent lamp sitting atop a nearby desk. Beside the lamp was some cherry-flavored gianduja chocolate made by Patisserie Higuchi and a black coffee Riko had bought her from Tarbucks. She—Minami, that is—was sprawled across a modest bed that could not even charitably be described as comfortable.

"Oh, are you awake, Minami?" asked Riko. "You were out for about two hours. Hey, guess what! While you were asleep, I figured out how to get onto the hardest route in *Upstart: Eternal Love*!"

Wait a second, she thought. *That's Riko? And I'm Minami. Right, that's correct. I'm Minami. But wait...* Her thoughts were all jumbled. Something still didn't add up. This was her room; that was Riko sitting across from her, and she was Minami. She'd brought her dating sim-loving friend Riko back to her place after their university classes let out for the day. Along the way, they'd stopped at Minami's favorite bakery for some chocolate and also bought coffee. She vaguely recalled saying something to the extent of "I'd take dessert over alcohol any day!"

"Are you still half asleep?" Riko asked. "Well, I guess it doesn't matter since your paper's done already."

“Yeah,” she eventually answered. This was a typical response for her, but something still felt off. Was she allowed to simply say “yeah” here? Not something more polite like “yes” or “indeed”?

“Okay, so get this,” Riko gabbled excitedly as she continued to mash buttons on the game controller. “You’re never going to guess whose route it is. The crown prince, Asbert! I’ve been going after him for two weeks now, and I *finally* have his ending!”

Minami looked at the screen Riko’s eyes were glued to and saw a very familiar sight: Charlotte and Asbert! Tears glistened in Charlotte’s eyes as she and Asbert stared at one another ardently, set against the backdrop of tomorrow’s graduation gala. *Huh?* she thought. She didn’t have the first clue what was going on. *Okay, I can accept that I’m Minami, but... Huh?*

Then it all made sense. *It must be because I’m so tired*, Minami thought. This was a dream, her brain’s way of processing all the recent miserable events. Still somewhat dazed, but oddly accepting of the situation, she began to listen to Riko’s monologue.

“See, to get with Asbert, you need to overthrow his fiancée, Claire, first! I was really stumped because no matter how high I raised my character’s popularity stat with him, I could *never* get his ending. It turns out the story branch that causes Claire’s downfall happens before her fifteenth birthday. All you need to do is have the second-oldest brother throw away the letter from Claire’s dead mom which she keeps locked up in a safe! That letter tells her to have her baptism in Old Lindel, not Noston. Oh, but it’s super hard to raise your popularity with the brother enough for that to happen!”

This is an awfully realistic dream, Claire thought. This strange dream had to symbolize some subconscious desire deeply buried in her psyche to take back her old life. *I must still have some attachment to it*. The thought struck her as awfully funny, and she giggled.

“What happens to the fiancée after her downfall?” she asked, now rather curious to see just where this dream would take her.

“Let’s see,” said her friend. “She leaves the Academy to go up north to an abbey, and then I think she vanishes somewhere around the way station in Iias.

She's just one of the rival characters, so she doesn't get that much screen time, you know?"

Claire was stunned into silence. Could she not have a happy future even in a dream?

"Anyway, do you want to give Asbert's route a shot too?" Riko asked. "I have a save from before Claire's fifteenth birthday." She handed the controller over to Claire.

"I'm good, thanks," she said with her biggest smile. "Because I'm sure I have a bright future filled with plenty of fun things ahead of me!"

How odd, she thought. *I'm getting sleepy again*. "Sleepy" was not quite the right word for it, given that she was already in a dream, but no matter. She thought she might like another bite of chocolate before going back to bed, but before she could act on that thought, her consciousness slipped away from her again.

"—aire. Lady Claire!" Someone was calling to her. "Lady Claire, do please wake up. We've arrived at the Iias way station."

Claire awoke with a gasp. *That's right*, she thought. *I'm on the road*.

The coach had already come to a halt. From the windows, she could see the bright lamps of the way station. "My apologies," Claire said. "I hadn't noticed. Thank you for driving the coach." She scrambled to collect her trunk and climb out of the coach.

Claire guessed she must have been so sound asleep that she hadn't realized the coach had reached its destination. *And I feel as if I've had the oddest dream*, she thought.

The coachmen briskly helped her carry the trunk off the coach. One of them, looking relieved, told her, "I'm very pleased you were able to have a rest, my lady, even if it was only for two hours. Your color has improved considerably."

"Did I truly look so bad before?" Claire asked, covering her cheeks in embarrassment.

“Ah, nothing more than the weariness of traveling after a day of lessons,” the coachman assured her. “And, my lady, please do forgive me, but even though Ias is a comparatively safe place for young ladies such as yourself, I hope you won’t mind if I accompany you until whoever is here to pick you up arrives.”

Oh no, Claire thought. Truly, a young noblewoman could not go on a long journey without an accompanying attendant. No matter how urgent her errand, at the very least someone should have come and picked her up in time for her to make whatever appointment she had. Most coach drivers wouldn’t have brought this up; his job was concluded the moment he deposited her at some nearby inn or café to wait for the person coming to escort her. However, these two coachmen were well acquainted with Claire, and their concern for her well-being extended beyond what would be considered strictly professional.

If she told them the truth, Claire ran the risk of her family finding out from the Academy where she had gone, and she hoped to avoid that. With Prince Asbert as enraptured with Charlotte as he was, Claire knew she might be persecuted as a risk to his future queen; furthermore, since she was unable to contact her family directly, she feared her father and brothers might not protect her if the worst should come to pass. Finally, above all, she honestly wanted to go make a fresh start in life as someone different.

Therefore, Claire replied, “Ah, yes, that’s right. I have an appointment waiting for me at the café just ahead. I left the Academy in such a hurry that my attendant might simply be running late.”

She worried the coachman might suspect she was trying to come up with an excuse to get away from him, but he only beamed at her, clearly none the wiser, and said, “Very well, my lady. Then I shall accompany you to the café.”

“Y-Yes, all right,” she said. *What a pickle I’m in!* she thought.

The Ias way station was a key point for travelers going to northern Noston. The town wasn’t as busy as a royal capital would be, but it still bustled in its own right. It was quite safe, and due to its thriving population, Ias was not a hard place in which to find work. However, Claire’s true destination was the abbey even further to the north. Just as only a certain class of society possessed magical powers, the same was true for this abbey run by the church. Being the

disgrace that she now was, Claire wanted to go to the place where she could make a name for herself in all her disgraced glory. Additionally, at the abbey she could potentially become a nun. The church held a great deal of power in Noston, and as such Claire thought it stood the highest chances of providing her a life of safety.

But if I can't find a way to shake him, Claire thought, then he'll find out that I'm on my own and intend to go to the abbey. Just as she stepped forward, forcing a faintly impatient smile as she went, Claire suddenly heard a voice say, "Thank you for waiting for me, my lady."



Who is that? thought Claire. The speaker was a tall young man with silky blond hair and a surprisingly youthful voice. Claire was well used to handsome young men owing to the years spent with her brothers and Prince Asbert, but she nevertheless found herself drawn in by his emerald green eyes.

“I am Vik,” the man introduced himself, “the good lady’s attendant. Thank you very much for shepherding her here safely. Everyone is waiting for you at the hotel on Main Street, my lady, so come now. I will carry your trunk.”

Disarmed by Vik’s charming smile, the coach drivers handed over the trunk without the slightest bit of caution. Claire’s smile momentarily went rigid. *Wait a minute*, she thought. *What if this man is trouble?*

Claire’s mind raced as she weighed the costs and benefits. Even if this man was up to no good, it didn’t particularly matter; the only items in her trunk were a few articles of clothing and basic necessities. She wore the bracelet that was a keepsake from her mother on her person, and she had money deposited in the bank under her own name. Claire decided she would be fine even if she lost the trunk. If this man did turn out to be a thief, then once the coach left, she could ditch the trunk and run to the nearest guardhouse to get away.

Within the span of a few seconds, Vik had acquired her trunk and then extended his hand to Claire with a gentle smile. She took a second look at this stranger. His clear green eyes seemed to be telling her that she would be all right.

I’m sure I’ll be fine, Claire thought. She smiled and took his hand to avoid broadcasting her concern. “There you are, Vik. Thank you for coming all this way to receive me. These gentlemen are from the Academy,” Claire said, indicating the coachmen. “They said, ‘Since Lady Claire’s attendant is coming from so far north, perhaps he is late. We’d best wait with her until he arrives.’” She quoted the coachmen so as to tell Vik her name without tipping off the drivers that he didn’t know it.

“My, my, I see. Thank you very much for going out of your way for Lady Claire,” Vik said, picking up on Claire’s intent. He inclined his head in a deep bow towards the coachmen.

Just then, Claire had the realization that every one of his gestures, no matter

how casual, were extraordinarily graceful. The way he carried her trunk, took her hand, and generally conducted himself suggested that he was a nobleman.

“In that case,” said one of the coachmen, “we had best be on our way. Do take care, Lady Claire! I look forward to seeing you again when the next term begins.”

“And I as well,” Claire replied. “Thank you for driving me this long distance. Be careful on the roads going home.”

After Claire thanked the coachmen, she watched the coach drift back down the road, growing smaller the further away it went. *Any minute now*, she thought. Yet the man beside her made no move to run off with her trunk. The coachmen again passed through the way station and then vanished out of sight. It was almost time to go. The whole time she had watched the coach leave, she had scoped out the road to the nearest guardhouse.

Then, when her mind was fully made up to run, she asked Vik, “Who are you?”

“I must have startled you, didn’t I?” he asked in turn. “Here, you can have your trunk back.” Vik passed it to her with a clear, easy smile. Well, he wasn’t a thief, at least.

“The name’s Vik,” he added, trading in his previously cordial airs for an unpretentious friendliness. “I saw you walking and thought I’d call out to you. That’s all.”

“You did give me a bit of a fright,” Claire admitted, “but I was in trouble, so you were a great help all the same. Thank you very much.” She smiled back at him, relieved. *Of course he’s not a thief*, she thought. *What kind of thief marches up to someone so brazenly and goes through all that song and dance just to pretend they’re acquainted?*

“I figured something was up, so I stepped in to help,” said Vik. “But it’s getting late. Do you really have a servant coming to pick you up? It’s dangerous for a lady to walk alone at night.”

Bullseye! Claire floundered for a moment to respond, but Vik simply asked, “Anyway, are you hungry? Want to grab a bite to eat?”

lias boasted plenty of cafés and restaurants open even past ten at night, each one sure to be crowded with customers: specialty cheese shops, beer halls selling tasty sausage, even bakeries selling tomorrow's bread.

Claire decided to join Vik on a walk down Main Street. *It's been so long since I was surrounded by such nightlife!* she thought, heart dancing for joy. Recently, even when she returned to the Martino mansion, she was either stuck at home or attending an evening party with Charlotte, so it had been quite some time since Claire had gone into town.

"Someone looks like she's having fun," Vik remarked, giving Claire an amiable look.

"I haven't been in a city for such a long time," she admitted.

"Anyway, this is the place. My friends and I are meeting up at the restaurant on the second floor."

Here?! Claire thought. This was the grandest place in all of Iias!

The first floor housed the hotel where she had planned to stay the night, as it was under the protective eye of the church and large enough that she could lose herself in the crowd. *I was concerned about going somewhere with a complete stranger,* she thought, *but if this is the place, I feel relieved.*

When they entered the restaurant on the second floor, Vik led Claire straight to a centrally located private room. His movements contained so much courtly finesse that they reminded her of the old days, further dissolving her worries.

"I found this young lady walking around," Vik called as he opened the door. "Mind if she joins us?"

"Good evening," said Claire, greeting Vik's friends. "I hope I'm not disturbing anything."

Three wide-eyed young men gazed back at her. "Of course you aren't," said one of them. "Vik, this girl's gorgeous!"

The men looked to be a scant few years older than Claire; judging by their attire, they were all knights. The largest of the bunch strolled up and amicably

introduced himself. “Nice to meet you,” he said. “The name’s Keith.”

“A pleasure to meet you,” Claire replied. “And I do apologize for the sudden intrusion. My name is Claire Mar—ahem! Pardon me. Claire Marx.” Nearly blurting out her real name made Claire quickly switch tracks.

“Miss Claire, is it? A pleasure. My name is Lui,” said another of the men as he leaned forward to shake Claire’s hand. His handsome shoulder-length black hair gave him a rather androgynous appearance.

“The pleasure is all mine,” she answered.

“And I’m Denis,” said the last knight, giving her a friendly, boyish grin. “Welcome!” He spread out both arms as if asking for a hug.

Claire was somewhat taken aback.

Vik slapped Denis upside the head. “What are you doing?” he barked.

“Ow! Jeez, Vik. There’s no need to be so serious.”

Thank goodness, Claire thought. *They don’t seem to be bad people.* Equally reassuring, it sounded as if Vik was his real name after all.

Vik passed Claire a menu and said, “Order whatever you like.”

She took in all of the options. *Hamburgers, fried chicken, baked potatoes with cheese and meat sauce, rice noodles! Look at all these foods I haven’t had since I last went into town!* Just reading them gave Claire an unexpected burst of excitement.

Vik and his companions chuckled amongst themselves as they watched Claire read the menu with sparkling eyes. After much thought, Claire ordered a helping of paella, a baked potato, a salad made from forest greens, and two glasses of wine.

Vik remarked, “Claire, there’s something strange about you.”

“Oh, really?” she asked.

“Yeah, anyone would think so. Just look at you. You’re wearing those fancy clothes, but I found you ready to walk around town in the middle of the night all by yourself. Not to mention, you were trying to give your coachmen the slip.”

Claire remained silent. She couldn't refute that.

"It crossed my mind earlier too, but I don't think this is your first time staying here, in the finest hotel in all of Iias." Vik's voice remained gentle even as he questioned her. Rather than sounding suspicious of Claire's background, it seemed more like he was genuinely worried for her.

"You are right about that," she said, trying to answer vaguely while calculating how much she could trust the group. "I've been here many times." She decided to proceed. "But I do not have any company this time. I've decided to travel alone."

"Alone?" Vik immediately pressed. "So I was right."

"Goodness, Vik," she giggled. "You're quite the worrywart, aren't you? You must love to help people, just like my father...does."

A large tear fell from her eye unbidden as those last words slipped out.

Lui, who had been watching Claire attentively, picked up on that. He lightly rubbed her shoulder and asked, "Claire?" in a worried tone.

Vik concluded that Claire's family must be a touchy subject for her and, after murmuring, "My apologies," fell silent.

"Aww, come on, Vik!" Keith groaned. "Claire, don't mind him. He doesn't have a brain in his head, and he's nosy as all get out, but he actually means well! Anyway, aren't you hungry? Do you want another drink? I hear girls love this sangria."

"Vik, how dare you make such a pretty lady cry?" Denis chimed in. "Go think about what you've done."

"No, gentlemen, hold on please," Claire said. "Vik is not at fault here; I apologize." She felt guilty for throwing a wet blanket all over their kindness, but her tears showed no signs of stopping. *Even I don't know why I'm crying*, she thought. Perhaps it was because it had been far too long since Claire had enjoyed such tasty food in town or conversed with such friendly company. Moreover, remembering her father and all the wonderful things he used to do for her caused Claire to feel such sadness that she could not stop crying. *This isn't very ladylike of me*, she thought. It was as if the desperate panic that had

lasted all evening at last gave way to this flood of tears; Claire's frozen heart began to unthaw and heal with the help of those gathered around her.

After a good, long cry, Claire told Vik and his friends about her life as the heiress of the Martinos, the complicated circumstances that had estranged her from her dear family, and the problem of her lack of magical talent.

Vik chose his response carefully. "I am familiar with stories like yours. The human heart is a weak and self-serving thing."

"Do you really think so?" Claire asked. Now that she was calmer, some of her usual presence of mind had returned to her. "Previously, I was considering taking the road north to the abbey. I do not have much magical skill, but what little I do have should see me there safely."

"The north?" Keith muttered, pondering the word. Vik lightly drummed his finger on the table.

Denis's cheerful grin vanished. "We actually came from up north ourselves," he explained. "The trouble is, the poor harvests of last autumn mean it's not a very safe place to be right now."

"Have you no one to guard you?" Lui asked with concern.

Suddenly, Claire recalled the words, "She leaves the Academy to go up north to the abbey, and then I think she vanishes somewhere around the way station in Ias." *Huh?* She thought. *What is that supposed to mean?*

Vik stopped tapping his finger on the table, his mind apparently made up. He asked, "Claire, what if you come with us?"

The other young men gasped. "Vik, you can't mean..." said Keith.

"Say it." Vik instantly shot Keith a pointed look.

Keith slunk back. "Sorry, never mind."

Huh? Claire pondered.

"We are actually returning home from a voyage abroad. We are not from Noston; we come from a kingdom far south of here called Paffuto. It's a long journey, but if you are no longer welcome in Noston, why not try living in Paffuto?" Vik asked her.

Paffuto, of course! Claire had known from the moment she laid eyes on them that there was something different about this group with their graceful gestures, sophisticated manners, and evident refinement. They were all clearly from noble houses, but it would have been very odd indeed if she somehow did not know four noblemen this close to her age here in Noston. It made perfect sense if they were actually from the far-off kingdom of Paffuto. She had only been to Paffuto once, two months ago for Charlotte's baptism, and even then Claire had only visited a little village near the border. However, Paffuto was renowned for its riches, vast tracts of land, and abundance of resources; its culture and civilization were advanced decades beyond Noston's. In fact, her brother had recently accompanied the king to Paffuto and returned with tales claiming that Paffuto's gorgeous cities overshadowed even Noston's capital city, Tillard.

Claire regarded the four of them, from Vik brimming with confidence, to Keith and Lui exchanging worried frowns, and Denis grinning in excitement. *I'm sure I'd be safe if I traveled with them*, she considered. *I had wanted to go to the monastery, but I suppose I haven't done any of the preparation to become a nun. It is a week's journey from here to Paffuto, which is such an awfully long distance, but I suppose it makes no matter if I can never return home anyway. Besides, I'd adore living in the capital of Paffuto!*

Though a number of potential objections about traveling with these young men arose in her mind, Claire rebuffed each one. She looked straight into Vik's eyes and answered, "I would love to come with you."

Vik almost looked bashful. "Really?" he asked. "I mean, Paffuto isn't such a bad place. The capital's very safe, and it's easy to make a living. If you'd like, we can find you work and a place to stay, so there's nothing for you to worry about."

"Vik, you really can't mean—" Keith once again interjected.

"Enough," Lui snapped. "Incidentally, Lady Claire, do you have a room for the night? It's already past midnight."

"I forgot!" she exclaimed. It had completely slipped her mind that the hotel's front desk stopped accepting customers at midnight.

“Then you may use my room,” Lui offered with a gracious smile. “I shall lodge with the other three in their room.”

I knew it! she thought. “Oh no, I couldn’t kick you out of your room,” she said. “Would you be amenable to us sharing it?”



Lui's wide-eyed look quickly softened into an affable smile. "Yes, but of course."

Lui, Claire had just now realized, was a handsomely androgynous girl. No gentleman would have allowed another to touch a crying girl's shoulder as Lui had earlier.

"Wow," Keith said. "We've barely met her, but Claire already realized that Lui is a lady knight."

"Uh-huh," Denis said. "It took me three years of knowing her before I figured it out."

"Claire, what kind of person are you?" whispered Vik as his eyes widened.

The next morning, Claire and her companions convened at the lias way station.

"Good morning," Vik said. "Did you sleep well?"

"Oh yes. It was the best rest I've had for quite some time," Claire responded, expressively winking to Lui as she did so.

"Indeed," Lui said, offering a smile of her own. "I enjoyed myself as well."

"Hey, don't forget that I was the one who extended the offer!" Vik griped childishly.

Lui ignored him. "I'd like to put up a ward of divine protection around us. Claire, would you step this way, please? Now just relax."

Then, she tapped Claire's back just below her neck and in between her shoulder blades. For a moment, Claire felt the slight touch of Lui's finger, and then her whole body felt lighter as ribbons of mysterious colored light twisted around her.

"Incredible," Claire breathed. "This is the first time I've ever had such a powerful ward placed on me." Her own magic was barely good enough for even the most basic of wards, and she didn't trust it to stave off danger on the road. However, Lui's magic was much stronger, and Claire thought it would probably prevent any robbers or highwaymen from descending upon the group. She had

wondered why four aristocrats, knights though they may have been, would travel without any guards in a foreign kingdom. This ward explained the mystery. *Perhaps Lui has blue, or maybe even white, magic*, Claire thought.

Claire then realized she had been staring. "I'm ever so pleased you like it," Lui said. "Will you ride behind me on my horse today?"

"Yes. Thank you for all of your help, Lui." Claire smiled and took Lui's hand.

"All right, that's enough of that," Vik grumbled. "Let's get moving." At his command, the horses broke into a canter.

Claire knew that Paffuto was a week away by coach, but she expected that they could arrive in about four days on horseback. On the first day of travel, the party left the way station in Iias and passed through a second one in southern Noston by nightfall. They reached the village of Flattern on the southern tip of Noston on the second day.

"Aren't you tired, Claire?" Lui asked.

"I'm all right, thank you," she said. The two of them had become fast friends over the past two days. Lui, Claire learned, had grown up as the daughter of a count in Paffuto and had known Vik since they were both children. Her family possessed strong magical powers and many ties with the church. Additionally, Claire learned that Lui disliked wearing women's clothing and instead preferred both masculine attire and conduct. Her years of training as a knight, Lui said, had been the best times of her life.

Vik glanced over at Claire and Lui then called for a halt. "I'd like to let the horses rest, so let's pause for lunch while we're at it."

"Very well," Lui agreed.

The five of them decided to visit one of the village's restaurants. Just ahead of them stood Fort Flattern, a major transportation hub. Shops and restaurants had sprung up around the fort until the area was more than deserving of being called a village. Claire, not wanting to be recognized in Noston, had suggested the largest of these restaurants in order to blend in with the crowd. It was just past noon, and the restaurant was moderately crowded as Claire and her friends ate.

This mushroom stew and walnut bread are delicious, she thought. Maybe I should work in a restaurant once I make it to Paffuto!

As Claire daydreamed an appealing potential future for herself, a waiter stepped up to the table bearing a tray of drinks. “Thank you for waiting, gentlemen and lady. Here is your after-dinner co—”

Wait, is he looking at me? Claire thought. *Oh no. Have I met him before?*

Claire started to panic, but before all of her friends could figure out what was going on, Vik stepped in, flashing the waiter a winning smile and asking, “Is something the matter?”

“Oh, I apologize for staring,” he replied. “I was only wondering if the lady was from Old Lindel.”

“Old Lindel, you say?” Claire repeated, equal parts surprised by the unexpected name and relieved that she hadn’t been recognized. If anyone were to have seen her this close to the southern border, then word might have gotten out that she was headed to Paffuto.

“Oh yes,” said the waiter. “Your hair color and facial features make you look exactly like a member of the Old Lindel royal family. My apologies if I offended you in any way.”

From behind the waiter, the restaurant’s proprietress chimed in, “The kingdom of Lindel was well-known for its beautiful people! You’re right; this little miss is a charmer. It’s no wonder you mistook her for a Lindel girl.”

Lindel had once been a little island kingdom located south of Noston. It had been small enough that its only city was a small castle town, but the country had prospered thanks to its rich natural beauty and abundance of urban sightseeing opportunities. However, tragedy struck forty years ago when an enemy nation attacked and razed Lindel to the ground in a single night. There were precious few survivors, and it was said that the royal family had not been counted among them.

“Why, you’re the spitting image of the charming young princess,” remarked the waiter. “I met her once when I was a boy. Please, do forgive the ramblings of an old man.” After his apology, he stepped away.

The rich smell of black coffee soon enveloped the whole table. *It smells lovely*, Claire thought. Just then, the word “Lindel” jogged her memory, and she recalled Riko’s words: *All you need to do is have the second-oldest brother throw away the letter from Claire’s dead mom which she keeps locked up in a safe! That letter tells her to have her baptism in Old Lindel, not Noston. She thought to herself, How odd. I don’t know why, but I suppose Old Lindel must have appeared in that peculiar dream.*

As Claire struggled to remember more of the dream, Denis asked her, “Have you ever been to Lindel Island before?”

She jerked out of her reverie and shook her head to clear it. “I haven’t. Didn’t Paffuto drive away the enemy nation? I heard that the survivors are attempting to redevelop the island as a sightseeing opportunity. People say the town is lovely, but I’ve never had the opportunity to visit.”

“Then let’s swing by Lindel Island on the way home,” Keith suggested with a grin.

“That sounds like a wonderful idea,” said Lui, “and I think it would make *Claire* quite happy. What do you think, Vik?”

“Shut up, Lui,” Vik muttered, ignoring the knowing smirk she gave him. He continued, “That’s fine by me. Let’s go to Lindel Island and spend the night there. It may be a sad place, but it’s undeniably the most beautiful island in my kingdom.”

With that, the band set off for Lindel Island.

The island came into view two hours after they left Fort Flattern, following a long, straight path flanked on either side by water. It was a curious place in that its road was often too unsafe to travel depending on the weather and the tides. Fortunately, the weather was lovely today, and Claire’s party was able to reach its destination with little trouble.

Upon arrival, Claire was at a loss for words. *My goodness!* she thought. The ocean’s deep blue color was almost frighteningly gorgeous, and the island itself resembled an enormous flower field. The old, history-laden flagstones and more modern buildings dotting the landscape rounded out the truly breathtaking view.

Deeply moved, Claire said, “What an *enchanting* place!” Granted, Noston had its own picturesque views, but Claire had never seen anything this splendid before. *Oh, Charlotte*, she thought. *If all this hadn’t happened, you and I could have come here together.*

As Claire brooded, a distant knight noticed the group and galloped up to them.

“Your Highness,” the knight exclaimed, “what item of the Crown’s business brings you here today?”

Your Highness?! Claire thought. Her mind momentarily went blank.

“No Crown business today,” Vik said. “I only wanted to show a friend around.” He indicated Claire to the knight.

“Of course, Your Highness. It is my pleasure to welcome Sir Keith, Sir Lui, and Sir Denis as well. And may I ask the name of this young lady?” The gnarled, old knight timidly turned in her direction.

Ah! The question caught her off guard. “My name is Claire Marx, Sir Knight,” she said. Claire then smiled brightly at him to conceal her disconcertment.

“Do not speak a word of this to anyone else,” Vik commanded the knight. The tension in the air grew so thick it could have been cut with a knife. The elderly knight initially gasped, but he then bowed in acquiescence and made his way back to the castle.

The three younger knights said nothing to break the heavy silence. Finally, it was Lui who pulled her handkerchief out of her pocket and polished the handle of her sword while nonchalantly remarking, “I warned you that you should have told her before it slipped out in some odd fashion like this.” Denis began to whistle innocently, as if this had nothing to do with him.

“He called you ‘Your Highness.’ Does that mean you’re the prince of Paffuto?” Claire asked.

She had suspected something was off from the moment he’d said “my kingdom.” Claire had at first assumed he was particularly patriotic, but something about that explanation hadn’t quite sat right with her. There was also the matter of that pointed look he had shot at Keith back in Iias. Moreover,

even in the two short days she had traveled with the crew, Claire had noticed a clear master-servant relationship at work. *But still, she thought, no matter how good Lui's wards are, it is unthinkable for a prince to travel with only three knights to protect him!*

As everyone sat down for dinner, Vik apologetically said, "I am Vik William Paffstant, the Crown Prince of Paffuto. Well, I figured I'd have to tell you before we reached the capital anyway, but I'm sorry for keeping it a secret for so long."

The crown prince! Claire thought dizzily. "I understand full well why you'd choose to travel incognito outside of your own homeland," she said. "But I fear traveling with the likes of me will cause a scandal. I wish I had known earlier..."

Her last words trailed away softly, but Denis caught them anyway and cheerfully responded, "Yeah, he should have spoken up ages ago. Vik, you're lucky she didn't turn down your invitation outright on account of you being a prince."

Oddly, even Lui joined in on the teasing. "That's right. Any proper noble lady would want to avoid Vik on precedent!"

Next to them, Keith sat with his head slumped. "I'm sorry, Claire," he said. In the midst of his embarrassed apologies, he likewise confessed to Claire that he was the son and heir of a marquis. Both Lui and Keith had advised Vik to tell Claire earlier, but Vik hadn't budged on the subject, much to his current regret. After calming down somewhat, Keith muttered, "But if he'd told you earlier, I guess you wouldn't have gone with us after all."

"Nonsense!" Vik quickly retorted. "Claire wouldn't let a little thing like that bother her, would she?" His words rang noticeably desperate.

Well, I'd have a few choice words to say about it! she thought. Claire looked around at her four companions, and a giggle escaped her lips.

"What if, after we leave tomorrow, I become Lui's lady-in-waiting?" she asked.

"That sounds lovely," said Lui. Coyly, she added, "You're like a little sister to me."

“Oh, heavens,” said Claire. “We can’t have that! One might suspect I’m your lord father’s illegitimate child.”

Vik saw Claire’s eyes twinkling and hurried to butt in. “By the way, Claire, when we’re done with dinner, shall we take a stroll around the back of Lindel Castle? There’s a beautiful spot to see after the sun goes down.”

The other three nodded. “Good idea,” said Keith.

Once dinner was over, the five of them took a walk around the back of Lindel Castle. The pleasant breeze carried with it a sweet, refreshing scent of flowers, and the full moon shone so brightly that they had no need of a lantern to guide their way.

“It’s just beyond here, Claire,” Vik said, indicating the end of a path that wound through a copse of tall trees.

Suddenly, the trees ended, and the view opened up before them. “My goodness!” Claire cried, accidentally raising her voice. “Is this a beach?”

Lindel Island was ringed on all sides by sheer cliffs, apart from this small stretch of coastline. The water was so calm that Claire could almost swear the moon reflected on its surface was the real thing. She thought that there must be nothing else in the world so beautiful.

“There is where a church once stood in Old Lindel,” Lui told her, pointing out the location. “Because Lindel is an island kingdom, its patron deity is the goddess of the ocean. People say the ocean around here behaves like holy water. Alas, the church was lost when Lindel met its sad fate, but the natural surroundings still have the power to heal our weary hearts.”

Claire was silent. She could guess why Vik had chosen to bring them here. *To help me...* She looked over to where he stood gazing out at the sea to disguise his own bashfulness.

“Thank you, Vik,” she said. “This comforts me more than you know. You truly do understand the hearts and minds of other people. I am sure you will make a wonderful king.”

Suddenly, Claire happened to remember Prince Asbert. As grave and dignified

as he was, he understood little of the subtle delicacy of people's hearts. Yes, he had been with her since they were both young, showered her with presents and compliments about her appearance, and otherwise acted as a model fiancé. However, Asbert had never once been there for Claire when she was in pain. In fact, she realized looking back on it now, he may never have even noticed the small victories and tragedies that made up her life. Even though he received only the finest education for gifted members of the royal family, Claire had always thought of Asbert as rather immature. Compassion, she thought, was vital for the future ruler of Noston, and so she had felt almost relieved when his attentions had shifted to Charlotte. Asbert could only win the trust of his people if he treated them with the benevolent love of a monarch and cared about someone other than himself. His marriage with Claire would have been purely for political motives, and as such, their feelings for one another didn't come into it. All that mattered was that Noston was in the hands of good rulers.

Conversely, Vik and his friends' consideration touched Claire. *The Prince of Paffuto is truly incredible, she thought. His retainers are all so young, and yet they are not only so considerate, but also very worldly. By way of comparison...Prince Asbert is enraptured with Charlotte for now, but I fear for poor Charlotte when something else captures his attention.*

She had slipped back into thinking about her now-estranged homeland, but perhaps that was only natural for one who had spent years assuming she would become its queen.

"Who are you thinking about?"

Claire realized Vik had come up next to her. "Oh, no one," she said. She decided to mix in a bit of the truth and added, "I was thinking about Noston. I'd never seen anything so beautiful back home."

Watching the full moon's reflection as it rippled in the waves, she lapsed into silence. Suddenly, memories of her dream a few days prior returned. *That letter tells her to have her baptism in Old Lindel, not Noston.*

Why had Claire remembered that just now? *Baptisms are supposed to take place at the church of the mother's birthplace, Claire thought. My mother was the youngest daughter of a baron in Noston. Why would she have me be*

baptized in Old Lindel?

As she puzzled over this, the serenity of the beach was pierced by a shriek from Keith. “Yowch! That’s cold! What’d you do that for, Denis?!”

Claire looked up in shock and saw Keith and Denis playing in the waves—or perhaps Denis dragging Keith into the water. She wasn’t sure which.

“Looks like fun,” Vik exclaimed. “I’m joining in!” He dashed off and just as he reached the water’s edge, Denis and his co-conspirator Keith joined forces to splash him.

“What a bunch of children,” Lui sighed long-sufferingly.

“Didn’t you say that the ocean here is like holy water?” Claire asked. “Does that mean I could walk in it?”

“Absolutely. This is a special kind of healing holy water, so I see no reason why there should be an issue.”

Claire’s eyes grew wide. She had never set foot in the ocean before, thinking it would be too unhygienic or improper for someone of her status. *I’m sure it would be fine if I only got my feet wet*, she thought. *Oh, but it’s night, and it’s cold. I really mustn’t.*

Lui took her arm as if she had read Claire’s thoughts. “Let’s join them,” she said.

Claire gasped. She wrested off her confining boots and felt the cool, dry sand between her toes. The wet sand made a squishing sound as she walked. Everything about this felt new and fresh. Claire stepped up to the water’s edge a short distance away from the boys’ horseplay and waited for a wave. A moderately sized one rolled in and touched her toes.

Oh my! she thought. But Claire had misjudged the size of the wave, and it surged forward all the way up to submerge her ankles before retreating back to the ocean. The backwash sucked away the sand around her feet, producing a truly unique sensation.

Just then, Claire’s companions gasped. Though the night sky was already brightened by the full moon, it suddenly lit up with a brilliant flash that left

them all wordless. A rainbow of colorful light wreathed the sky. At first glance, the illumination appeared to be a blinding white, but it soon became apparent that it contained every color in existence as it spread across the sky in a view approaching the fantastical. A radiant beam bore down on the beach itself with fierce intensity.

“What is that?” Vik cried.

“Is it the aurora?” Keith could barely believe his eyes. “I thought you couldn’t see it from Lindel Island.”

Lui put a hand to her chin and mused, “Could this be what I think it is?”

Claire’s mind was in utter disarray. *I feel like I’ve seen this before*, she thought. *That’s right! It reminds me of Charlotte’s baptism. Yet then, it was the water that glowed white. And here, well, the whole sky is glowing, like the aurora I once saw in the far north.*



Just as she thought this, Claire heard a familiar refrain in her head: *That letter tells her to have her baptism in Old Lindel, not Noston.*

What does this mean? she thought. Suddenly, her body felt heavy. Claire tried to stand, but her legs refused to listen, and she buckled at the knees.

Claire vaguely registered Vik yelling her name from somewhere nearby. As her consciousness faded, she thought, *I'm falling*, and then suddenly she saw a bright light ahead of her. Was it the aurora dancing in the sky?

No. It was just the desk lamp.

“Hey, Minami! Are you still in there?” Riko was saying.

As Minami's eyes adjusted to the lamp light, she realized that she was in her own room. “Yeah, sorry,” she answered automatically. “I think I just kind of zoned out there for a moment.” For a second, she felt disconcerted to hear a voice other than Claire's coming from her own mouth.

Today, Minami still had to finish her paper for school. She and Riko had just returned from picking up Riko's preordered fanbook (complete with complimentary preorder goodies) for her favorite dating sim, *Upstart: Eternal Love*.

A clicking sound in the kitchen told Minami the hot water was done boiling. *Oh yeah*, she thought. *I was making tea for Riko.* Her body moved to get up without her conscious effort. What on earth was happening? *I have this weird, vague feeling that I'm not actually me.* Minami made the tea and returned to the table where Riko was snacking on some caramelized nuts and dried fruit she had bought earlier.

I think we had gianduja last time, Minami recalled. The fuzziness in her brain cleared away as that memory came back to her. Then she saw the book on the table and went speechless.

Riko noticed the look of surprise on her face and said, “It's shocking how many pages there are for Claire, right? Well, I guess the main character's kind of sleazy, like the title of the game says, so it's a nice change of pace to have an actually okay character for once. She checks off all the boxes for being a perfect

lady, so she's turned out to be even more popular than the main character and all of the love interests!"

"Wow..." Minami said flatly.

"Don't give me that! Weren't you into Claire too? You were asking me what happened to her when I was playing Asbert's route. It's too bad what happens to her on that route, but on the knight route or the brother route, she uses her intelligence to dominate over all the love interests and becomes like a motherly saint in their eyes," Riko babbled.

"I do suppose that makes sense..." Yet Minami knew well that this was true. She remembered seeing colorful images on the screen of Claire rebuking Asbert or giving advice to various knights.

"Hm? Minami, you don't usually talk like this," said Riko.

Even though this was just another dream, Minami was surprised by its realism. The book in her hand had a physical weight to it, and she could even smell the apricots and apples from the tea. Most realistic of all was the fact that she felt right at home here. She remembered buying the tea, and she could recall the faces of her friend Riko's parents. She could have sworn she had been standing on the beach in her bare feet a few minutes ago, but now her feet were nice and dry in fuzzy socks. She was Minami, not Claire—at least in this world. *I wonder which one of us is dreaming*, she thought.

As Minami became lost in thought again, Riko continued, "In honor of its release, the devs made an exclusive DLC route for those who bought the book! I saw on socmed that they added a hidden character just for this route, so I'm super excited! It looks like you need to have your popularity raised with everyone, but you can't get any good endings. If you get the true ending instead, this route starts right after. I can't wait! I'm going to stay up *all night* playing!"

"Hey," Minami asked her excited friend, "is there a Lindel Island in *Upstart: Eternal Love*?"

"Lindel Island?" Riko repeated. "I've cleared most of the story, but I don't think I've heard of a Lindel Island. It must not be in the game. The closest thing I can think of is the kingdom Claire's mother comes from, Old Lindel."

Wait, so Claire's mother is from Old Lindel?

"Gotcha," Minami said. She felt a little uneasy, so she turned the page on the book in front of her. *Oh!* she thought. There, occupying a full two-page spread, was a color illustration featuring Lindel Island as she had seen it during the day, with its beautiful blue seas, small yet dignified castle, and colorful fields of charming flowers. In the upper-right corner were the words, "This exclusive route continues on after the true end. Our heroine reunites with the prince on a gorgeous island!"

Minami's heartbeat quickened. She wanted to turn to the next page, but some part of her didn't want to know what happened next. *To begin with*, she thought, *what was this so-called true ending?* She searched her memories of playing the game.

The true ending took place during the Royal Aristocratic Academy's graduation gala. The player character watched Asbert and Claire's grand entrance with admiring eyes while the other love interests milled about in the background. It was a very "and they all lived happily ever after" sort of scene, she recalled. There, Asbert and Claire officially announced their engagement. As the grand party, featuring many royal guests from other countries, stretched on into the evening, the player character partied with all the other love interests in a sort of tacky harem ending.

Wait a minute, Minami thought. *I recognize one of those men!* Her eye was drawn to a young man on the cusp of adulthood with blond hair, emerald green eyes, and handsome features. *Vik!*

As Minami hesitated to turn the page, Riko said, "I'm really interested in the prince they added in this new route!"

Minami scrambled to look. "Oh," she breathed. She wasn't mentally prepared for it, but there he was, just as she feared he'd be—Vik.

"Oh!" chirped Riko, looking over in excitement. "He was one of the background characters from the true ending. He's pretty good-looking, don't you think? You know I love how serious Prince Asbert is, but I gotta say, cute, boyish characters are so fun too!"

He's only boyish in appearance and voice, thought Minami. *He's a wonderful,*

mature person on the inside... Wait, what?!

Something Riko had said finally connected, and it felt like a stake was being driven into Claire's heart. Minami, for her part, didn't know what to think. Suddenly, she reached out and gobbled down a handful of the caramel nuts on the plate in front of her. The crunchiness of the nuts and the sweetness of the caramel convinced her. *This can't be a dream.* She pinched her cheeks and then pinched them again even harder. *Ow*, she thought. *Well, of course it hurts.* A part of her couldn't believe this was happening even as another part of her thought this was completely natural; ultimately it was the latter, the Minami part of her, that won out.

"Riko," she began. "Is this game in VR?" Minami knew the answer already, but she had to ask.

"What a weird question! But gosh, I wish. I'd love to go after the boys in VR. Imagine being able to see them up close and lifelike!" The thought sent Riko off into her own la-la land.

Minami lived alone as a college student, so all of her things—her favorite candy, her video games, her drinks, even her favorite blankets and dresses—were here in this room. She was fully aware that she lived in a modern-day Tokyo neighborhood, and yet she could remember as clearly as day living the life of a character in the game. She could picture them all: Denis's signature grin, Keith's sunken cheeks as he apologized, the warm touch of Lui's hand when she applied the ward, the excitement she felt when Vik appeared at her side.

So does this mean I'm going inside the game? It was hard to believe, but the moment Minami arrived at this conclusion, another wave of drowsiness attacked her.

"Riko, I..." she began. Yet ultimately, she could not share her findings with anyone else, and she sank back into unconsciousness.

She next found herself wrapped in comfortable bedding, completely unlike the set on Minami's bed. Claire opened her eyes and tried to make sense of the blurry scene. Gradually, the world came into focus around her, and she realized

she was in the hotel on Lindel Island.

Lui stepped into Claire's line of sight. "How do you feel?" she asked.

"I'm all right. But how did I...?"

Because Claire was obviously still disoriented, Lui filled her in. "You fainted on the beach earlier, so the boys carried you to the hotel. You've only been asleep for an hour or so."

"Oh goodness." Claire was astonished. "I'm sorry for all the trouble."

"Think nothing of it. People often faint after being baptized. The goddesses or spirits grant them such great power that their bodies can't handle the strength, and they pass out."

"Baptized?" Claire repeated, unable to hide her bewilderment. She didn't recall anything like that happening on the beach.

"Do you remember seeing lights that looked like the aurora before you fainted?"

"Yes, I remember that much."

"I suppose the lights were caused by your baptism. I don't know what color your magic is, but I imagine that its strength surpasses both white and silver combined. Do you remember how I said a church once stood there on that beach? The church is gone now, but the holy water still remains. Therefore, it only stands to reason that you could be baptized there. That is, if your mother was born in Lindel."

Claire's heart skipped a beat. *That's right*, she thought. *This is a game world*. Yet again, Riko's words floated through her mind: "The closest thing I can think of is the kingdom Claire's mother comes from, Old Lindel." Had Claire been more willing to accept the facts, she would have realized this sooner, but too little time had passed for even her first strange dream to sink in.

"I was given light pink magic when I was baptized at fifteen," Claire said. "I can't believe that this was another baptism."

"Were you baptized in Noston? I didn't think it was even possible to receive any magic from some place your mother has no connection to. To receive light

pink in such circumstances indicates that you must have truly strong divine protection from the spirits.”

Lui mixed honey into a cup of warm tea and handed it to Claire. Claire accepted the cup silently but shook her head, still refusing to believe Lui’s explanation.

“Well, drink your tea and rest, even if you don’t believe me,” Lui said. “Vik looked worried sick about you, so I’m sure he’ll come check on you shortly.”

“Thank you very much, Lui.”

Lui smiled at Claire in response.

The next morning, the group set off from Lindel Island and then arrived in Wurtz, the capital of Paffuto, around midday three days later. Vik had covered his head with a scarf from the moment they’d crossed into Paffuto to avoid being recognized. Although Denis had been recognized and called out to by many young women in the hotels and restaurants along the way, the party did not meet with any undue difficulty on their travels.

A completely enthralled Claire looked at the city all around her. “This is magnificent,” she breathed, her voice filled with wonder. “Tillard can’t begin to compare with this.”

Grand stone buildings towered on the Wurtz skyline, the likes of which were nonexistent in Noston, apart from the castle. Here and there between the stone buildings were interspersed myriad shops, facilities, and parks. The tree-lined avenues were broad enough to let many carriages ride abreast, and there were even little canals for purely aesthetic value. What was most shocking of all was that every design and layout had obviously been carefully planned for ease of living and harmonious beauty.

“What do you think?” Vik asked, pride evident in his voice. “Welcome to the castle town of Wurtz.”

“I love it. It’s absolutely wondrous!” Claire’s eyes shone with emotion.

“You can always come back here another time,” he said. “The town’s only a twenty-minute walk from the castle. Now, let’s go.”

“Hold on, please,” said Claire.

Lui put a hand up to stop the horses from trotting off, and Claire slipped off her borrowed horse.

“I want to thank you all for taking me this far,” she said. She bowed deeply as Vik looked on in confusion.

“What do you mean?” he said. “Didn’t I tell you our plans multiple times on the ride over here? You can stay in the castle until you’ve grown used to everything! And if you don’t like being just a guest, then we could always use a court mage.”

“I appreciate the thought, but I fear that if you arranged for my livelihood, it would cause a dreadful scandal for the royal family or some other unforeseen conflict,” Claire explained rationally. “I apologize if this oversteps my boundaries, but I consider you all to be my very dear friends. This is the first time I’ve managed to have friends who consider one another people first and nobility second.” She then added, “Besides, I’m afraid I don’t want to call my dear friend ‘Your Highness.’”

Keith made a strange face and snorted. Vik shot him a glare.

“That’s just the kind of person Lady Claire is!” Denis said, backing her up in his usual childish way.

“Let her go, Vik,” Lui admonished. “It would be cruel to recapture a caged bird that has only now tasted freedom for the first time.”

Vik paused for a moment. “Are you sure you’ll be okay?” he asked, his voice laced with concern for her.

“Yes, most likely. I think I shall spend a few nights at a nice hotel and then look for work. I am very much looking forward to my new life! But if I do ever end up in true danger, I would be pleased to welcome your help once more.”

Vik responded in a voice that was equal measures proud and playful, “And you will have it! But let me give you this in place of a pass to the castle. With this, you will always be able to call on me.” Thereupon he pulled out his pocket watch and gave it to her.

Stunned, Claire asked, "Are you sure you don't want to give me something smaller? In regards to both size and value."

"You can have my earring," he suggested.

Shocked at yet another bold offering, it was all Claire could do to say, "No, no! This will do." And so the matter was settled.

Chapter 2

After leaving Vik and the others, Claire set off through the city of Wurtz. As she went, she admired fashionable dresses and jewelry in the windows of the many shops set along the carefully planned, elegant streets. Later, she stopped in at a pretty café with a spacious outdoor seating area, purchased a latte, and chatted with a group of girls around her age. *How lovely!* Claire thought. Her heart swelled with hope for the bright future ahead of her.

Without any further delay, she set off for an employment agency. Thankfully, Paffuto and Noston shared the same currency, so if Claire were so inclined, she had enough put by to spend a few days at a luxurious hotel and enjoy herself with fine shopping and gourmet delights. However, Claire had not come to Paffuto to vacation, and thus she needed to secure a means to make a living.

She arrived at the employment agency and saw a board along one wall where the list of today's vacant positions hung. These jobs ran the gamut from harvesting crops to working as a salesperson in a high-end boutique. *So many jobs!* Claire thought. *Paffuto's economy is truly in a much better state than Noston's.*

As Claire stood there marveling at the number of available jobs, an agency clerk greeted her. "Good afternoon," she said. "Are you looking for a job, miss?"

Claire turned to the clerk, a short-haired young woman who appeared only a few years older than Claire. "Indeed I am," Claire answered. "It is a pleasure to meet you. My name is Claire Marx." She curtsied politely.

For a moment, the clerk seemed taken aback by Claire's manners, but then she smiled and extended her hand. "I'm Sun, an agency coordinator. We offer many jobs here, including some not on the board."

Claire gave her a light handshake. "Thank you, Sun. There are so many jobs that look appealing, but I'm afraid I don't know which one to choose. Would you be so kind as to advise me?"

“Of course. Come with me to my desk, please.”

Sun led Claire further inside to an area with separate consultation desks then handed Claire what looked like a blank résumé form. “Go ahead and write your employment history here,” Sun said. “In the meantime, let me bring you a cup of tea.” She smiled and stepped away.

The agency was filled with people looking for work, but Claire could only see a total of four consultation desks. Strange. Why was the place so busy and yet this back area nearly deserted?

Claire looked down at the form in her hand. *Name: Claire Marx. Education— Oh, what to do about that? I can’t possibly write that I attended the Noston Royal Aristocratic Academy, but I don’t want them to think I’ve never had a proper education.*

As she puzzled over this, Sun returned bearing a silver tray. On it rested a tea set that, for all its simplicity, was recognizably high quality at just a glance. Claire was used to such fine crockery, but she wondered why an employment agency she’d entered at random would spare no expense for its clientele. Still, she accepted the cup and sipped the tea. Oddly, Sun watched her do this with a fierce interest.

“It’s very good,” Claire said. “Thank you.”

“Of course.” Sun looked down at the resume. “Oh? Am I reading this correctly? Claire, you’ve never attended secondary school?”

“Oh, um, actually, I attended the Noston Royal Aristocratic Academy,” Claire explained.

Sun nodded as if that was no surprise to her.

“I am originally from an aristocratic family in Noston,” Claire continued. “However, our family declined into poverty, and I was made to leave school and be separated from my family. For my safety, I began using my mother’s maiden name.” This was by and large a lie, but the parts about her birthplace and leaving school were certainly true. Claire was unaccustomed to lying, and she feared that her story was full of holes. However, it seemed to hoodwink Sun, whose puzzled expression disappeared at the explanation.

“That would explain it,” she said. “Well, then I have just the job for you. Wait here one moment, please.”

She dashed away but soon came running back. “Here, Claire. Take a look at this.” Sun passed Claire a light blue paper that looked a little bit different from the ones hanging on the board up front. The word “classified” was stamped across the top of it.

Claire read aloud, “Seeking a governess for the Reine family?”

“So you can read it? Wonderful!” replied Sun with a grin. “This job posting is written in magical letters that only aristocrats with magical powers can read. The Reine family told us they would happily accept anyone who could read it, but until now we hadn’t been able to find many suitable candidates. When I saw you and realized how well-mannered you are, I just knew you’d be perfect! I’d be happy to refer you to the Reines!”

Compared to Sun’s enthusiasm, Claire responded far more hesitantly. Up until a few days ago, after all, Claire’s treatment at the hands of nobility had been less than gentle. “I’m afraid...I may not be suited to this, as I am not the best at housework.”

Sun refused to hear a word of it. “Don’t worry about that!” she said. “The master of the house is very kind, and I hear he’s hiring a governess for just one child, his thirteen-year-old daughter. You aren’t required to do any teaching, only be a sort of sisterly companion. I’m sure you’ll do just fine!”

Sun pushed another blue paper at Claire and donned a special set of reading glasses. “This job provides room and board. You would live in the house and be required to work on weekdays from 4 to 8 p.m. Your weekends would be completely free, and you are allowed to seek additional employment elsewhere. Now, let’s talk about your salary!”

Claire wasn’t much interested in a large salary, but having a room in a nobleman’s house would provide her with a decent level of security. Plus, the amount of freedom the job afforded certainly appealed to her, and the pay seemed reasonable for a live-in governess. She wondered what the daughter would be like—hopefully not one so spoiled she drove other governesses away, at any rate! *This looks like quite a good job, all things considered.*

Claire made up her mind and said, "I will gladly accept."

Sun beamed. "Wonderful! The family said to tell them at once when I find a young lady that fits the bill, so let's introduce you to the Reines immediately."

The Reines lived east of Main Street in a beautiful, natural area. Their mansion was tasteful, with white brick walls and flowerbeds full of roses in a kaleidoscope of colors. Sun told Claire that the head of the household was a newly minted baron, and while his house was chic, elements of it still remained true to Paffuto's traditional culture. Claire liked the idea of that.

Upon arrival, Claire and Sun were led into the parlor. As she perched on the edge of a plush sofa, Claire thought, *I hope this works out. I'll feel terrible for Sun if I made her come all this way only to fail to land the job.* Abruptly, Claire's ingrained sense of inferiority froze her fingertips in place as she recalled her time spent living in disgrace.

Sun recognized the worry on her face and said, "It's okay, Claire. I promise, this will be no trouble for you. Our agency has helped place many governesses in the past, so I know what I'm talking about."

"Thank you, Sun." She acted cheerful in order to keep up appearances.

Then, the door opened, and a married couple wearing gentle smiles entered the room. *There they are!* Claire thought.

"Hello, Sun," said the husband. "I received your message. Then this must be Miss Claire?"

"What a lovely young lady she is," the wife chimed in.

With the greetings out of the way, the Reines seemed eager to rush into business. Claire judged that the two of them were lighthearted, boisterous people.

"Yes, that's correct," Sun said. "She came to the agency a short while ago, and I wanted to bring her to you before another family snatches her up to be their governess!" Her eyes glittered playfully.

"It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance," said Claire. "My name is Claire

Marx.” She took pains not to betray how nervous she felt as she greeted both husband and wife in turn.

Baron Reine beamed as he watched her navigate these formalities. Then he said, “Yes, you’ll do! My name is John Reine, and this is my wife, Marie.”

“A pleasure to meet you, Claire,” said Marie, looking pleased at her. “I’m glad to know my daughter’s care will be in such capable hands as yours.”

That was fast, Claire thought. Sun winked at her as if to say, “Look, what’d I tell you?” Whatever the case, the job was now hers.

“As you can see, we are the nouveau riche. Upstarts, if you will,” John explained with a chuckle. “My father held a title that I did not inherit, but my business pursuits took off some fifteen years ago. I had so much wealth that I didn’t know what to do with it, so I donated to the government and the church whenever I could. And for that, they made me a baron.”

“It’s true,” added Marie. “I grew up right here in town as a commoner, and now suddenly I’m a member of high society! Sometimes I still can’t wrap my head around it.”

The Reines happily admitted this to her, but Claire assessed that high society disdained them because of it. Families with new money, it seemed, were unwelcome regardless of country. *I suppose that explains why they haven’t acquired a governess yet, despite the working conditions of this position,* Claire thought. However, she admired their courtesy in explaining the drawbacks of the job up front while still maintaining an air of cheer regarding the grim subject. Claire found herself warming to the couple.

Having explained the circumstances, John grew serious. “Our daughter Isabella is thirteen and hasn’t had a governess in some time now. We would truly appreciate having a nice young lady like you around to keep her company.”

Claire smiled back, wholeheartedly. “It would be my pleasure.”

Thus, with her acceptance, Claire was granted a room at the mansion that very day. When Marie led her to the room that would be hers and opened the

door, Claire gasped. *This is what they consider to be a servant's room?* she thought. The space was laid out like a wide, airy studio apartment with a puffy sofa and lounge suite, a canopy bed, and a simple shower room off to the side. It was situated on the ground floor and full of light. When Claire went to the window, she discovered that she could go out to the terrace and admire the roses. There was also an outdoor table just right for sitting outside and enjoying a cup of tea.

"Lady Reine," she said, "this is absolutely wonderful, but is it really for me?" From its size and furnishings alone, Claire could clearly tell this was no servant's room but a bright and spacious guest bedroom.

Marie beamed at her. "Do you like it? This is one of the guest bedrooms, actually. We knew it wouldn't do to give someone from the Noston Royal Aristocratic Academy anything so plain as a servant's room. After all, you are far higher class than we are!"

"Oh, no! I couldn't have that. Shouldn't I stay in a room like the other servants have?"

"Oh, but why? Our servants' rooms are only half this size." She gave Claire a charming wink as she continued. "We would like you to teach our Isabella how a lady thinks and behaves. We wouldn't want you to forget how the nobility live, so we've given you this room for your own."

Given that this was what the job description had indeed alluded to, Claire felt that she couldn't refuse. "Very well," she said. "I will do my best to live up to your expectations." *I suppose that the Reine family believes in giving back to their employees as opposed to simply lining their own pockets. What luxury! For all the vanity and pride of high society, it is the Reines who are truly radiant.* Claire bowed as she internally gave them the highest praise she could think of.

Isabella, Claire learned, was presently vacationing at a holiday home and would not be back for another week. This gave Claire the time to do whatever she pleased. *I could ask for more work to do around the mansion, Claire pondered, but I'm sure the master and mistress of the home would simply refuse.*

"In the meantime," she said, "I think I'll write a letter to Vik and the others to

let them know I've settled down. And in such little time! Everyone will be shocked." With that, she sat down to address a letter to Vik in the palace.

Two days later, just after nine at night, Claire finished dinner with the servants and sat down to enjoy a book over a cup of lemon tea with honey back at her bedroom. She had begun settling into life in the Reine mansion and now felt right at home. *The weather was lovely today, she thought, and after my boots became muddy, I had the chance to clean them and leave them out to dry!* Up until this point, all of Claire's basic needs had been met by maidservants, so she took great delight in developing her own domestic skills.

Just then, she heard an odd knocking sound. *What was that?* she wondered. Claire lifted her head and looked around but didn't notice anything out of place. She looked back down to her book when—knock, knock. There it was again! Her head jerked up. *What in the world could that be? It almost sounded as if someone was tapping on my window. What should I do? Should I call for help?*

Worried, Claire stepped up to the window, drew the curtain back, and found Vik standing there. "Hey!" he said. "Long time no see."

She spluttered in shock. "What are you doing here?"

He grinned roguishly. "Would you rather I came in through the front door?"

"Are Keith and the others not with you?" she asked.

"They're keeping a lookout by the garden wall."

She dearly wanted to know what Vik was doing here, but his answers told her that whatever route he had arrived by was not a legitimate one.

"You'd best come inside," she said.

"May I really?" Vik looked uneasy about being invited into a young woman's room at night, but this, Claire rationalized, wasn't the time for that.

She explained patiently, "I'd rather not have everyone know the crown prince is climbing my garden wall to come see me."

With that, she tugged Vik into the room. "You landed yourself a pretty good job," he said. "A governess for the Reines? Wow!"

“Indeed,” she answered. “They’ve been ever so kind to me, which is a great relief.” Claire poured him a cup of tea. “The Lord Reine is not well regarded in high society, I’m afraid, but he and his family are all generous, respectable people.”

“I’ve talked with Lord Reine a number of times. On the whole, I get the impression he’s a good, down-to-earth sort of man. He’s charismatic, and many people speak highly of him.”

“Yes, indeed,” Claire said. “But Vik, I must ask. How did you know this was my room?”

“You left your boots drying outside,” he pointed out.

Claire turned red and hurriedly put the boots away. Well, among the many mysteries of this unexpected visit, at the very least she now knew how he’d found her so easily!

Vik began to tap a finger on his knee. Claire had learned over their several-day journey together that he often did this when he was puzzling over some decision.

“I hope everyone is doing well?” she asked casually.

“Yeah, they’re all good. Keith’s as serious as ever, and Lui’s her old self. Denis’s been out throwing parties with girls every night too.”

Claire chuckled as she imagined her three other friends.

“What about you?” he asked as he picked up his cup of tea, giving it a swirl. Vik’s pupils glowed like lanterns in a forest of emerald green. There was something almost magical about them, Claire thought.

“I am living quite comfortably, as you can see,” she replied. “The Lady Isabella will not return for a few more days still, so until then, I am free to do as I please.”

“Good to hear it,” Vik said. He hesitated, but then added, “Has anything changed for you since you were baptized on Lindel Island?”

“I haven’t noticed any particular changes. After all, I am not employed in any work for the church or the government, so I have little need to use magic.”

Claire failed to grasp what Vik was driving at and, to his frustration, continued conversing lightheartedly for several more minutes before he finally steeled his nerve and asked, “Claire, have you thought about going back to school?”

Claire blinked in surprise at the sudden question. “I beg your pardon?”

“Like Noston, we also have several schools for noble children here. Your magical powers have the ability to change the fate of Paffuto—no, forget that. Claire, you could change the world if you wanted to, and I think you should learn how to use that power. That is, to control it as well. To make sure it doesn’t go haywire.”

Claire suddenly realized that this visit was not from her friend Vik, but from the Crown Prince of Paffuto.

“Very well,” she said. “Then I shall go.”

“What?” Vik said, momentarily struck dumb by the immediacy of Claire’s response.

Vik’s recommendation, made in his role as leader of the country, made perfect sense to Claire. As one of his subjects, she sat up straight and answered him forthrightly. “If that is what you advise, then I shall go to school. A good education is important, and I’m sure it will bring me peace of mind as well.”

“Wait, are you sure?” he asked. “I mean, I don’t want to force you! And I don’t want to make you do it if it brings back unpleasant memories.” Vik panicked, hoping that Claire wasn’t simply saying that to please him.

“I can’t exactly refuse,” she responded. “Of course, I need to ask permission from Lord Reine first. But, well, I couldn’t say no after you came to ask me in such an unorthodox fashion!” She giggled.

“I mean, I did also just want to see you,” he admitted. “Wait, no, that’s not what I meant! Anyway, didn’t you say something to that effect in Iias? That it made you sad to think about leaving your school in Noston. The only places to learn magic in Paffuto are the Royal Academies, but I don’t want to send you somewhere that’ll stir up bad memories so soon after that event.” Vik, who was normally so confident, now shook his head and tried with all his might to explain himself. Something about this almost embarrassed Claire. “Just to

clarify, we're the only ones who know about your magic, and of course the others are keeping their mouths shut. I promise you, I'm not thinking of you as a pawn I could use for the sake of my country. It's just that, if you do want to go to school, now's the best time to enroll."

"Why is that?" Claire asked.

"Because the new term starts next week, and I will be entering my last year of school. I thought that having a friend around might make the transition easier for you. If you do start this term, I intend to have them put together a special one-year program for you."

"Hold on a moment, please," she said.

"Hmm?"

"Vik, this means we are the same age!"

Thus Claire decided to attend the Wurtz Royal Academy for one year.

After Claire received permission from Lord Reine, preparations were swiftly made for her enrollment in the upcoming term. In a country as large as Paffuto, every region boasted its own royal academy, meaning that the Wurtz Royal Academy did not have dormitories for boarding students. Instead, all pupils lived in the surrounding area and commuted to school. Naturally, a school as prominent as the Academy attracted many local students, but a non-negligible number of students from afar also rented out mansions to live in during the term.

On the first day of the new term, Claire awoke at 6 a.m. She showered, dressed herself, and then partook of a simple breakfast of cranberry bread and café au lait while formulating her after-school plans. *Today, I will begin my governess duties*, she thought. *This program I've devised should do nicely for our first day.*

With all of her preparations in order, she stood before the mirror in the simple navy Royal Academy uniform, looking herself up and down. Noston's academy allowed students to wear whatever they wished, but Paffuto's supplied its students with uniforms in order to prevent the young noblewomen

from attempting to one-up each other with their outfits. Claire decided she liked this system.

A few days ago, Claire had dropped by a salon to have her hair touched up after the impromptu clipping she'd given herself the night she left Noston. She felt no need to do anything fancy to her naturally straight hair, but she did want a professional touch; Claire was painfully aware that the slightest thing out of place could raise eyebrows in the aristocracy. Therefore, she'd decided on a style that would allow her to blend in as much as possible. *Vik went to all the trouble of securing my admissions, she thought, so I don't want to cause him any trouble.*

Once her careful uniform check was complete, Claire left her room. Just as she was about to step out the front door, Baron Reine called out to her warmly, "Good morning, Claire!" Even in her first week of work, the Reines felt comfortable enough with her to dispense with all formalities. They treated her as if she were their own daughter, and the thought of that filled Claire with happiness.

"Good morning, my lord," she said. "Thank you once again for letting me attend school. I'm really ever so grateful."

"Enjoy yourself and take care on the walk," he said. "Normally, you can take as much time as you'd like coming home, but do come straight home today, okay? Isabella is due back today from her trip."

"Of course, my lord. Farewell."

Time to do my best, Claire thought, both in school and with Isabella! She straightened her posture and then took the first step out the door and into her new life in Paffuto.

The Academy was less than a twenty-minute coach ride from the Reine mansion, and the coach deposited Claire in front of the gates. The school's modern design astonished her. Instead of the ornate decorations she had expected, the spacious grounds were peppered with a number of multistoried buildings. Impressed, Claire walked onto campus where she noticed a crowd of people gathered in the yard.

What is going on? Claire wondered. She took another look at the throng and

realized Vik was at its center, surrounded by a ring of retainers and an even larger crowd of girls clutching gifts and letters. Claire judged that they were not so much eager to curry favor with the prince as they were fans of his personality. *Reminds me of a certain someone*, she giggled to herself as she remembered Asbert. Just a few months earlier, Claire was only another one of the girls in his crowd, but it already felt like a dream to her now. She was grateful that she didn't need to repeat that song and dance at this school too.

I'd best not try to talk to him here, she thought. Claire was glad to have spotted Vik so soon, but there was no need to rush up to him and join his passel of followers. As someone who was not a member of the Paffuto aristocracy, but only here due to Vik's goodwill, she felt it would only cause trouble if the rest of the student body knew that they were friends. Claire carefully skirted the group.

The first lesson of the day entailed a test to determine which class each student would be in. As many in attendance learned how to govern their families' homelands, it was commonplace for them to transfer schools often—studying this year in Wurtz, last year in eastern Paffuto, the year before that in western Paffuto, and so on. As a result, Vik had warned her beforehand, each term typically started with a placement exam. Even though Claire would undertake a special program tailored to her high magical capabilities, her primary occupation was still the Reines' governess. In order to better serve them and learn more about the aristocracy of Paffuto, she was to take some of her classes with the rest of the student body.

I think I worked out most of the answers, she mused, *but I wonder how everyone else did*. As the former disgrace of the Martino family, Claire tended to be self-critical of her test scores. And although she was not personally satisfied with them, objectively they were by no means poor grades. In fact, she always scored in the top ten percent of her class; however, she was unsure how she would measure up against her new classmates.

Suddenly, a girl said hello to her. Claire lifted her eyes. The girl before her had curly, chestnut-colored hair and bright, pretty eyes. "This is your first day, isn't it? My name is Lydia Carrere."

“I am Claire Marx. It is a pleasure to meet you,” Claire smiled back.

“May I sit next to you?” asked Lydia.

“But of course; it would be my pleasure,” Claire answered automatically. Actually, she had noticed Lydia earlier. Among the various friend groups and cliques in the classroom, Lydia had been one of the few sitting alone when Claire came in. Claire gathered that it was less that Lydia had no friends and more that she occupied a unique position in the school’s social hierarchy. For such cutthroat places as a royal academy, having a delicate understanding of this balance was instrumental.

“I was surprised to see such a beautiful young lady joining us after break,” Lydia said. “Will you be attending the Wurtz Royal Academy from now on?”

“No, I—” Claire stopped herself. “Yes, I will. I studied in the north last year.” It wasn’t a lie, more or less, Claire reasoned.

“My, really? Then I should love to show you around, Lady Claire. If you have any troubles whatsoever, please don’t hesitate to ask me for help.”

“Thank you, Lady Lydia.”

Lydia beamed at her angelically.

Once second period was over and lunch began, Lydia led Claire to the cafeteria. “The results of the tests will be posted this afternoon,” she explained, “so it’s best if we eat and quickly return to class.”

Just as Claire nodded, a shrill voice nearby exclaimed, “What, pray tell, do you think you’re doing? Who said you could do that?!”

Claire turned to look at the cause of the disruption and saw an otherwise dainty-looking girl screaming at three of her friends. Such sights were all too familiar to Claire. At her old school, parents’ social standing and power struggles were likewise reflected in their children. The screaming girl’s father was likely the highest ranked of that little group. Normally, there was a tacit agreement that the girls in the highest echelons were to rebuke the troublesome ones of lower status in these situations. However, when no one moved to step in, Claire realized that this girl’s father must be the highest ranked of all the families represented in this cafeteria.

“That is Lady Nicola,” Lydia whispered. “She’s only in her second year of school, but she is also the king’s niece and youngest daughter of a duke. The other students don’t dare cross her.”

Claire remained silent. At the Noston Royal Academy, she had been the one to step in and mediate many of these arguments owing to her status as Duke Martino’s daughter and Asbert’s fiancé. However, Claire was neither of those things here. She felt terrible for the pale girl on the verge of tears who was being chastised at length for what had probably been a small mistake. The students in the hallway leading up to the cafeteria muttered amongst themselves about Nicola’s menacing anger.

“Did I not tell you to arrange for today’s luncheon?” Nicola shrilled. “Now you tell me that we cannot eat in the garden, and you have the *audacity* to suggest we eat in the cafeteria?!”

Without thinking, Claire said, “Huh?”

Nicola spun around to locate the source of the noise. Her face was dark red with barely bridled anger. “Who said that?” she bellowed. “Reveal yourself now!”

It just slipped out, Claire thought ruefully, *but that’s such a silly reason to be mad*. Her heart sank. *I suppose I have no choice but to handle this now*. She took a deep breath and then said, “It was me, Lady Nicola. My name is Claire Marx, and I could not help but be alarmed at seeing such a fine young lady bombarded with the same ferocity you might expect in an attack coming from one of our enemies. My understanding was that we are not presently at war, so in my resulting shock, I made a sound.”

Claire smiled, radiant with the top beauty of all of Noston. The other students murmured to themselves, astonished at the disparity between the daintiness of Claire’s face and the cutting edge of her words.

Nicola flushed even redder and began to say, “How dare you—”

She couldn’t finish before a very familiar voice asked, “What’s going on?”

Vik! There he was, right behind Claire. As they had previously decided to keep their public and personal lives separate, Claire gave him a polite bow befitting

his elevated station and Lydia followed suit.

“Oh, Vikky!” Nicola cried. “Wonderful timing! I was just wondering if you’d be joining us for lunch today.”

“I wasn’t aware lunch preparations typically drew such an audience,” Vik said coolly, gazing around at the crowd of onlookers.

“Oh, no, Vikky. It’s just that girl—”

“I’m not interested in your excuses,” Vik said. “And I’ll thank you to remember that this *lady* is my dear friend Claire. I will not tolerate insult to her.”

The students gasped, and the whispering in the corridor redoubled. Originally, it had been Claire’s brazenness that caused the stir, but that was not the reason for the current buzz. *Vik, you fool!* Claire groaned internally.

In that very instant, Vik stopped and muttered, “Ah.” A light of recognition dawned in his eyes, as if he had either heard Claire’s thoughts or realized the weight of what he had just done. Shooting Claire an apologetic look, he said to his group of followers, “Let’s go.”

“Yes!” they replied, and away the group went.

In order to maintain the school’s social order, Vik and Claire had decided to hide the fact that Vik was the one who secured her enrollment, but it was no later than lunchtime on the first day of the term that word of Vik’s “dear friend Claire” began winging its way around the school. *But that’s my fault*, Claire thought.

Sighing over her failure to mind her own business, she turned away just in time to see a blue aura around Lydia’s open palm blink out of sight.

“Oh?” Claire inquired. “Lady Lydia, may I ask what it is you are doing?”

“I’m quite a skilled magic user,” Lydia confessed. “I thought that if Lady Nicola were to turn on you, then perhaps it’d be wisest if I closed that dainty mouth for her. Just for lunch time, of course.” Lydia followed this with a sweet smile.

Now I understand why Lady Lydia possesses such a unique social status, Claire thought. As surprised as she felt, she was also deeply impressed with Lydia’s sense of justice and magical ability alike.

After school, Claire returned straight home to meet Lady Isabella as promised. She had also promised to have Lady Lydia over for tea sometime as a mark of their friendship. But because the Marx family lived so far away, Claire explained, she was living with the Reine family and paid for her room and board by serving as their daughter's governess. Lydia's eyes sparkled at the invitation. "That sounds lovely," was her soft-spoken reply. Although governesses occupied a relatively high position in society, there were many young noblewomen who saw them as no better than common servants. That Lydia didn't hold the same view thrilled Claire and made her want to deepen this budding friendship.

Still mulling her new friend over, Claire opened the mansion's front door. There stood an angelic young girl who chirped, "I'm so glad to see you, Miss Claire!" Her cheeks glowed, and her almond-shaped eyes sparkled. Claire immediately took a liking to her after noting the girl's good posture, which suggested a quality upbringing.

"It's a pleasure to meet you," Claire said, taking Isabella's hand. "My name is Claire Marx." *This must be Lady Isabella*, she thought to herself.

Isabella waited impatiently all throughout Claire's introduction and then blurted out in response, "I'm Isabella Reine. I'm sorry that you had to wait a whole week for me! My mother told me there was a wonderful new governess here to teach me, so I cut my vacation short and came back as soon as I co—"

"Calm down, Isabella!" Hearing her daughter's voice, Baroness Reine rushed in. "You're bothering Miss Claire, Isabella. At least have the patience to let her put her things away and change clothes."

Claire realized that Isabella must have been waiting all day for her to come home. Isabella paled when her mother scolded her, and Claire felt a smile break out across her face. Squatting slightly to be at Isabella's eye level, she said, "Likewise, I'm sorry to have made you wait. Now, I am going to prepare for today's lesson, so do please give me just another moment. All right?"

Claire had decided that their first lesson would be on how to conduct oneself during a tea party. In Noston and Paffuto alike, tea parties were integral to social life, and proper manners were of vital importance. Basics such as how

one handled their teacup and what one chose to discuss barely scratched the surface; the location of the venue, flavor of tea, and choice of refreshments were likewise of grave concern. One's deportment in a tea party could potentially be a matter of social life and death for one's entire family.

Claire sat Isabella before the tea set and drew on her pool of past knowledge to teach her young charge all the manners a thirteen-year-old girl should know. When she finished her explanation, Claire asked, "Do you have any questions?"

"I took notes," Isabella said, "but I don't think I'll be able to remember all of this right away."

"It is the same for everyone. Don't worry; you shall learn as we go. All right?"

"Yes!" Isabella paused. "Did you know, Miss Claire, that my room's right above yours? I was wondering if I could come visit you when there's something I don't understand."

"Of course. So long as I am home, do drop in at any time." *How sweet she is!* Claire thought. *And quick on the uptake too. She truly is her parents' daughter.*

Claire's rush of fondness for Isabella prompted her to remember teaching Charlotte manners. Back then, she had worried for Charlotte, who was often left all alone at tea parties, but Charlotte never took notes like Isabella had. *I hope she'll be all right as Prince Asbert's fiancée,* Claire thought.

She looked at the intelligent little girl in front of her, only two years younger than her own sister, and smiled.

Claire's first month in Paffuto passed rapidly. In Noston, she had felt pressured to play the part of the duke's perfect daughter, but here in Paffuto, Claire was free to be herself. The other students kept their distance from her after the scene with Nicola, but the marquis's daughter Lydia cared not one whit about that. Claire found herself blessed with a good new friend and an enjoyable time in school. She scored plenty well on the placement test and made it into Class A with both Vik and Lydia. She sat in with them during morning classes and had private magic lessons in the afternoon. Soon, both her academic and magical skills showed great progress.

At home, Claire gained the impression that Isabella, for all of her teenage honesty, was really pushing herself to be likable. She idolized Claire and hung around her constantly unless Claire was studying. She called Claire the big sister she had never had, and Claire, in turn, felt as if she now had another little sister. *I'm having so much fun*, Claire reflected one night as she wrote in her diary.

"Hey," came a voice from somewhere.

Claire spun around from her desk in its corner of the room. Then, noticing who it was, she sighed. "Why is there a prince in my room again, Vik?"

"Why can't I come visit?" he countered. "I wanted to see you." He grinned teasingly at Claire's reaction and folded his arms across his chest.

The two of them had grown quite close during the last month. While they did see each other in passing every day at school, they hadn't spoken to one another since that fateful incident on the first day of the term. Vik's retinue personally saw to that, refusing to let her get close enough to talk to him. He, in turn, couldn't reach out to Claire, and the two of them decided to keep their distance so that everyone would forget that absolute blunder of a first day. As a result, their only means to spend quality time together was through Vik's daily visits to Claire's room.

"Then you'd best go around to the front entrance and formally introduce yourself to the family," she said.

"Are you sure?" he said. "If you're serious, then I will."

"That was another joke!" Claire cried, but in reality it wasn't entirely a joke. She loved passing the time with Vik like this. One minute he would grin so brightly anyone might fall in love with him, and then a moment later he would be flashing the serious eyes of a prince. He was worldly thanks to his vacations in other countries, and he was a quick thinker as well. Not to mention, as she had discovered over and over again during the trip from Noston, he was kind to a fault.

"But I do wonder if you should really come here every day," Claire added. "I hear you have all sorts of official duties to attend to."

"Yes, and I do perform them, of course. Can't I have a few minutes with you

as a reward for all my hard work?”

Claire picked up on the intensity of Vik’s words and changed the subject. “Tomorrow is the weekend,” she said. “Do you have any sort of business then?”

Vik seemed to be harboring affection for Claire in a manner that was all too clear for her to read. Claire knew there’d be a horrible scandal if anyone found out the crown prince was habitually calling at a house where the thirteen-year-old daughter of a baron lived, but all the same, she could not bring herself to stop these visits. His behavior was so gentlemanly that she couldn’t help but trust him and cherish his visits every time.

“I have a whole mountain of paperwork to get through tomorrow,” he said with a sigh. “Keith and I’ve been locked up in the office trying to get it all done.”

Keith must be waiting at the office for Vik to return, she thought. *Oh!* She was then struck with an idea!

“Do you think I could ask Lui to help me with something?” she suggested.

“Lui?” Vik repeated, puzzled. “Sure, but why?”

“I heard in my private lessons this week that there is a special magical library in the castle with many taboo grimoires related to magic and legends.” She paused for a moment and then continued, “I’ve heard it also contains records of kingdoms that have since fallen into ruin, and I would like to see these for myself.”

“I see where you’re going with that. Sure.”

The library was filled with books and papers related to the history of Paffuto, but only certain members of the aristocracy and their guests could enter.

“Would tomorrow work for you?” Vik asked.

“Yes, of course. Only, I don’t want to disturb Lui on such short notice.”

“Nah, I’ll go with you.”

Claire yelped out a “What?” at Vik’s unexpected response. “But don’t you have work to do tomorrow?”

“Not if I go back and finish it all now. Besides, I bet Keith’s getting lonely

without me.”

Vik rose from the sofa he had been sitting on and stepped over to Claire’s desk. He ran his thumb over the pocket watch sitting atop the desk and murmured, “Listen, after all the time it’s taken, you’d have to be out of your mind to think I’m letting your first visit to the palace be with Lui in the library.”

He sounded so put out that Claire giggled. Then he came and stood just a little too close to her. Her heart skipped a beat.

“I promise that I’ll finish before noon,” Vik whispered, his voice suddenly so serious Claire almost couldn’t believe this was the same man she had been joking with a few minutes ago. “It’s a date.”

Vik strode away and lightly climbed out the window, closing it behind him as Claire sat frozen in her chair.

The next morning, Claire woke earlier than usual and crawled out of bed still tired. *He said, “It’s a date,”* she thought, *but surely he didn’t mean it in a literal sense?* After Vik had left the night before, she began to try to review her school lessons but couldn’t get the image of Vik’s face out of her mind. Claire knew Vik liked her as a friend, but what had happened last night? Was that only as a friend? Having been raised from birth to be Crown Prince Asbert’s fiancée, Claire believed herself immune to romance and did not know how to make heads or tails of this. *He’s a prince,* she reminded herself. *That means he must have a fiancée. But then, what does he mean by coming here every day?* Claire felt torn. It just didn’t make sense!

As she stewed over the complex circumstance, Claire attired herself in her favorite one-piece dress. Back in Noston, it simply wouldn’t have done for her to go out in anything but a gorgeous gown, but now she deemed this simpler yet still classy frock most appropriate. Even after settling on a pair of heels that matched the color of the dress, Claire found that she had some time to spare. Therefore, she decided to walk to the palace and so switched into some boots to make walking easier and then slipped the watch on her desk into her pocket.

Claire left her room and was just about to go downstairs when she nearly bumped into Isabella who wasted no time asking, “Are you going somewhere,

Claire?”

“Yes,” Claire said, beaming. “I am going to meet a friend.”

Isabella was sharp, and she knew better than to pry, given Claire’s current evasiveness. Still, she deflated slightly as she said, “I see. Can you read my poetry anthology with me during our next lesson?” She looked Claire up and down, adding, “You’re always pretty, Claire, but you look even more gorgeous than usual today! You and your friend must have fun plans, huh?”

The castle was an hour’s walk from the Reine mansion, and when Claire arrived, she presented the pocket watch to the man standing guard at the gate.

“I have an audience with His Highness Prince Vik,” she explained. Internally, Claire wondered nervously whether or not wanting to use the library really constituted an audience.

“Might I momentarily examine that, my lady?” inquired the guard.

Claire jolted in brief surprise before answering, “Yes, of course.”

Yet just as she made to pass the guard the pocket watch, she heard a voice saying, “This young lady is my guest. Let her pass.”

She turned, and there stood the very tired-looking pair of Lui and Vik. *Oh, thank goodness!* she thought.

“Your Highness,” she greeted him politely as the guard goggled at them. “It is wonderful to make your acquaintance again.”

“It’s lovely to see you again, Claire,” said Lui.

Claire cried, “Lui!” and ran to envelop her in a hug. “Oh, how I missed you!” Vik watched the two of them embrace with a frown.

As they walked inside, Claire turned to Vik and teased, “I suppose His Highness is done with his work for the day?”

“Naturally,” Vik boasted.

“Thanks to the help of Denis and yours truly,” Lui chimed in, rolling her eyes at her friend. “Claire, you look lovely today, but...are you a bit tired, perhaps?”

Claire's heart skipped a beat. "P-Perhaps just a bit," she admitted. "I had quite a lot of schoolwork to attend to, you see."

"Oh yes. I can only imagine that your private magic lessons must be quite the challenge. I remember being worked half to death at school before I graduated two years ago," Lui said with a sympathetic nod.

"We're here," Vik announced, as he led them into the library. It was smaller than Claire had expected it to be, about the same size as Asbert's office back in Noston. However, unlike Asbert's office, the little room was crowded with shelves, each lined with a multitude of books.

"These are the grimoires," Lui explained, indicating a certain shelf. "All the books containing curses are kept under lock and key so that no one can read them."

Claire's objective today wasn't to learn about ordinary magic. She wanted to understand the riddle of the magical power that had been granted to her on Lindel Island, and in particular, the hidden secret of her mother's background. The possibilities had occupied her mind endlessly since the day of her second baptism.

Vik and Lui understood this desire all too well. "Here, Claire," Vik called from a different row of bookshelves. "I found a set of classified documents about Lindel."

Claire glanced over and saw him standing in the restricted section, an area cordoned off with a magic seal. "Vik, surely I can't read the books on those shelves."

"I don't see any issue with it, so long as you can pass through the seal and read the magic writing."

Sure enough, Claire easily stepped through the seal and found that she could focus her magic enough to read the words on the pages Vik handed her.

Lui grinned wryly and said, "Our court mage placed that seal. I can't begin to guess how powerful your magic is, Claire, but I truly think you have the power to change the world."

"It's a pity you turned my offer down and let the Reines snap you up," Vik

remarked.

With Lui's honesty and Vik's teasing, Claire didn't have the time to be frightened by her own power.

"We're going to go take a nap by the door, so take your time," Vik told her.

"Indeed," Lui said, "as a certain someone only just finished his work thanks to the effort of all his retainers."

It was considerate of them, Claire thought, to leave her to herself. She set about reading through the documents which confirmed much of what she had already suspected. The kingdom of Lindel had been attacked several decades before, its royal line wiped out save for a sole survivor: the three-year-old princess who had been smuggled out by a lady's maid to safety. The girl—likely Claire's mother—was then taken to a low-ranking aristocratic family on the edge of Noston near Old Lindel who secretly raised her as their own daughter.

Looking back on it, Claire realized that she and her brothers, who took after her mother in terms of appearance, didn't resemble their grandparents much at all. She'd never bothered about it before, but now that it had come to light that her mother may truly have been the lost princess of Old Lindel, she realized that it made perfect sense. *I wonder if father knows*, she thought. However, it was perfectly plausible for a daughter of a nobleman, no matter how low in rank, to marry into the Martino family without raising any questions. For a moment, she wondered if Benjamin had been in on Charlotte's plot—but, she reminded herself with an internal sigh of relief, that made no sense.

Claire hunted through the shelves for more information on Lindel while Vik sprawled across a bench near the library door. Sitting upright next to him, Lui read a book.

Presently, the door opened, and Keith stuck his head in. "I'm done, Vik," he called.

"Nice job," said Vik as he rose from the bench.

"Poor Keith," Lui said. "You look worse than you did this morning."

"You're telling me," Keith replied. "Filing documents after a night of no sleep is brutal on the body. I don't know how I'll be able to hold up in sword practice

later.” He sagged to the floor and refused to move any further.

“I don’t remember teaching my knights to be so picky about their work,” Vik teased. Keith didn’t dignify that with a response, and soon the only sound filling the silence was the faint noise of Claire flipping through the pages of a book.

“Is she going to be at that for a while longer?” Keith asked.

“Yeah.”

“Then can we talk outside for a bit?”

“I’ll watch Claire for you,” Lui offered, so Vik nodded and followed Keith out of the library. The two walked out to a wide corridor facing a courtyard.

Keith launched straight into his argument. “It’s plainly apparent that you’re giving Claire special treatment, Your Highness.”

Vik didn’t so much as move an eyebrow in response. He stared at Keith coolly. “Is it now?”

“Perhaps I am being too forward, but I am saying this as your longtime retainer. Lady Claire does not have the right social status to marry you, Your Highness. Please don’t pursue this any further.”

A breeze blew through the open corridor. Vik leaned on the stone wall and looked off into the distance for a few moments before remarking, “Yes, I am already well aware.”

Keith made an apologetic face and joined Vik leaning up against the wall. “She’s excellent, isn’t she? And I don’t mean purely in terms of looks. You’d think she was a duchess or a princess from the way she carries herself, and she’s as clever as they come.”

“You’re telling me,” Vik said with a bitter smile. “You should see the way she acts at school.”

Keith scratched the back of his head. “I suppose you wouldn’t mind having her as a mistress,” he said. “That is, I’m sure you’d welcome that.”

“Yeah,” Vik answered. “But she’s not the kind of girl who would be content with that role.” He sounded almost as if he was trying to convince himself. Claire had thus far made no move to acknowledge any of his slight advances; if

anything, he felt as if she were drawing away from him. She must have been all too aware of the differences in their stations, he thought. *If only she were the kind of girl who'd love to be a prince's mistress.* Trusting his full weight to the wall, he closed his eyes.

That evening, the group of five friends decided to share a meal again for the first time in months at a bar in town. For some reason, Claire's heart wasn't in it, and Vik was likewise in an oddly gloomy mood. Picking up on this, Denis brightly asked, "So how've you been, Claire? I heard you're going to the Academy now."

"Yes, I am," she said, forcing herself to respond with as much cheer as she could muster. "I am pleased to see you've also been keeping well."

"The second they let me go, I said goodbye to the Royal Academy, and I haven't been back since," Denis admitted. "No more studying for me! And the girls think they're all too highfalutin to let their hair down and have a good time."

Lui glared at Denis. "He says this, but he graduated as valedictorian."

"You did?" Claire cried. "How admirable, Denis!"

"Yup. Lui and I were in the same grade, but she never beat me once."

Lui's glare intensified. Getting caught up in their playful banter, Claire grinned as she tried to picture how the both of them must have been in school. "That's a surprise," she said. "I would have imagined that Lui would be stronger by far in magic."

Just after the waiter brought them more wine along with a seafood and garlic dish, Keith opened his mouth and asked, "Claire, did you find what you were looking for in the library earlier?"

Claire paused, fork in hand, and wiped her mouth with her napkin. "Yes, I did," she responded. "I found more than enough. Thank you all for giving me this opportunity." Remembering how they'd stayed up all night to finish their work just for her, she bowed her head deeply.

Shelling a nut, Denis nonchalantly said, "Really? So what'd you dig up

exactly?”

“I discovered that Lindel’s three-year-old princess escaped after the attack on the kingdom. This is only supposition, but...this means it is possible that my mother was a princess of Lindel.”

The other four gasped. While they had all assumed Claire was descended from one of the few aristocratic survivors of that attack, they had never guessed she was a member of their royal family.

Claire continued calmly, her face unchanging throughout. “There is one question I do have. Why is all the information about Lindel in the restricted section of the library? I should think neither the contents nor the covers of those documents are in any way objectionable.”

Vik began tapping his finger on the table. “It’s complicated,” he said.

Noticing his habitual mannerism, she urged him to continue. “It’s fine, whatever it is. Tell me the truth, Vik.”

Understanding just how resolved Claire felt, Vik finally admitted, “Paffuto was deeply involved in the destruction of Lindel.”

“Whatever do you mean?”

Vik looked straight at her and launched into the story. “There once lived a margrave on the borderlands near Lindel. He wanted to expand his territory through any means necessary, and as a result, Lindel was destroyed and the margrave deposed by the king of Paffuto. This much of the sad tale is common knowledge. I assume you’ve heard it as well, Claire?”

“Yes,” she said.

Vik rested his elbows on the table and laced his fingers together. “Everything from here on out is only what I’ve pieced together. Understand?”

The knights were unperturbed as Vik looked to each of them in turn. Judging from their reactions, Claire surmised that what he was about to say was an open secret among both the royal family and their retainers.

“This is the real story,” he said. “That margrave did not attack Lindel with zero forewarning. He first targeted the king of Paffuto, but his lands and titles were

stripped from him when the coup failed. Although the margrave himself was executed, the king mercifully allowed his family and servants to live on in disgrace. The family, however, did not lose their ambition to return to power, and they chose to launch a surprise attack on the small neighboring kingdom of Lindel.” He dropped his gaze as if it pained him to speak. “It would not be an exaggeration to say that Lindel’s fall is the fault of the Paffuto royal family.”

“And that is why information about the matter is restricted, isn’t it?” Claire asked. This came as a terrible shock to her, but what could be done? It was only another part of the misfortunes involved with ruling a country. Granted, it surprised her that her mother might have been the princess of this persecuted kingdom, but she had little by little begun to accept this fact ever since she had visited Lindel Island.

Seeing her look less distraught than she had been before, Vik asked her, “May I know when your mother passed away?”

“When I was no more than five,” said Claire.

“Was she ill?”

Vik was normally hesitant to pry into her private life, but today he seemed oddly willing to dig deeper into her past. Claire shook her head. “I’m afraid not,” she said. “Father will not tell me the details, but I’ve been told it was a terrible accident.”

“I see...” he said. His eyes clouded over.

“Why do you ask, Vik?” she questioned. Open secret though Lindel’s downfall may have been, Vik’s face was still writ large with a concern that even the knights couldn’t surmise.

“This is only my speculation,” he prefaced, “but I’ve heard that there was a noble family who assisted in the attack, and another noble family who figured out their plans and made to stop them.”

The knights bristled at Vik’s words, and the tension in the air thickened until it seemed almost palpable to all seated at the table.

“The latter family is the Marquis Carrere’s, and thanks to them we had enough forewarning to stop the margrave’s family in the early stages of their

attack and prevent war. If I were to guess, I would assume the Carreres were the ones who helped the princess escape. They must have hidden these documents to protect her.”

“To protect her, you say...” Keith murmured.

Everyone else fell silent until Claire turned to Vik and asked, “Am I understanding correctly that a noble family in Paffuto assisted the margrave?”

“Uh-huh,” Vik said. “Our investigations could uncover that much. But even now, we still don’t know which family.”

Oh no! Claire thought. This all came as a terrible shock to her. “My mother was very young when the attack happened,” she said, “so if her identity was discovered, then perhaps she was murdered to prevent the truth from escaping.”

“I’m sorry, Claire,” Vik said. He bowed his head to her. “People have said that this was my royal family’s failing, but there was honestly so much chaos at the time that no one foresaw the backlash. The king was a wonderful, kind man. I can’t think that his refusal to murder an entire family was in any way a failure.”

Vik put his head in his hands, and Keith followed suit. Now Denis continued the story, saying, “This is the first I’ve ever heard of another family assisting the margrave’s family. I guess that investigation must be what caused some families to fall from grace and others, like the Reines Claire works for, to receive titles in the last forty years.”

Lui said nothing but squeezed Claire’s hand in sympathy.

Claire straightened in her seat and said, “Vik, please look at me.” She gazed directly into his eyes as she said, “There is nothing that can be done now for either Lindel or my mother. Most importantly, you have done nothing wrong. Paffuto is rich in every way, including in the kindness of its people’s hearts. We are thankful to you and hold you and your family in the utmost respect for giving us such a wonderful place to live in!” Then she lowered her head. “I had no idea about any of this until just now. Thank you, everyone, for giving me this opportunity to learn about my past.”

Claire could not deny that she felt deeply shocked, but she was wise enough

to know that Vik was not the true object of her fury.

An hour later, Lui turned to Claire in concern, asking, “Do you always drink this much?”

Red-cheeked, Claire protested, “No, today’s just a bit...never mind. Lui, will you share a drink with me?”

Normally, Claire took her wine in moderation, but she had decided that alcohol might be just the thing to lift her spirits tonight.

“Very well.” Lui grinned. “I’ll leave Keith on guard duty and join you.”

“I barely drink either,” Denis said. “So don’t worry, Miss Claire. You two can drink as much as you’d like!”

The wineglass in Claire’s hand began to loosen her tongue as the effects of the drink went to her head. “I always thought that I led such a happy life,” she said. “But now I find out that my entire life is a lie. What’s the good of being the eldest daughter of the Martino family? My father is a failure! He couldn’t even protect his wife!”

Vik’s ears pricked up as those words slipped out. “The Martino family?”

“Yes,” Claire slurred, now thoroughly drunk. “I’m Claire Martino. Honestly, I’ve wanted to tell you the truth for ages now—to you, to the Reines, to everyone! I can’t stand deceiving everyone I care for.”

“The Martino family,” Vik murmured, unable to hide his surprise. “That’s the duke’s family I met in Noston at that ceremony.”

He took another good look at Claire. Unaccustomed to heavy drinking as she was, her cheeks were flushed from the wine, and her eyelids drooped as sleep threatened to overtake her. Lui, noticing Vik’s stare, spoke up in Claire’s defense. “Vik, I think she’s had enough. How about you send a message to the Reines and have a room made up for her in the palace?”

Vik ignored Lui’s suggestion and asked, “What is the name of your ex-fiancé? The one your sister stole from you at the Royal Aristocratic Academy.”

“Asbert Lucia Nottingdam,” Claire said. “But he’s a good match for my sister,

so I don't mind..." As her sentence trailed off, she slumped over onto Lui's shoulder and fell asleep.

Vik crossed his arms and muttered, "Asbert... That's the Crown Prince of Noston."

I can feel the sun, Claire thought. *How lovely it is*. She felt swaddled up in a soft, fluffy bed with fine, smooth linens. As she turned over in the bed, fragrant incense wafted from a nearby censer, leaving her with just a hint of sweetness and a refreshing aroma precisely suited for the morning.

Wait. Claire was coming to a realization. *Is this not my bed at the Reines'*? She jolted upright. *My head aches. This must be my first ever hangover*, she thought. She grimaced and then looked around. She lay in a canopied bed at the center of an enormous room; the bed was likewise so huge that it could have slept many Claires if not for the piles of pillows and cushions. On the bedside table sat a glass incense burner.

"Are you awake, Claire?" Lui called from somewhere off to Claire's side. That made Claire realize where she was, and, along with the recognition, a wave of despondency swept in.

"Lui?" she asked. "Did I..." Claire had no idea what had happened, save for the fact that she had ended up in the palace.

Lui peeped through the hangings on the bed. "Good morning, Claire," she said. "I have some herbal tea which will help clear your head. Will you join me at the table?"

Claire nodded and rose from the bed. Practically folding in on herself in shame, she padded across the plush carpet and sat down opposite Lui. "I apologize for yesterday," Claire said. "Lui, did I..." Pitifully, she could recall precious little of the night before. She remembered Lui offering her a drink, but from there Claire's memory failed her. She was almost too afraid to ask what foolishness she had performed afterwards.

"You fell asleep partway through dinner," Lui explained. "We were closer to the palace than to the Reines', so Vik had you brought here."

Claire squeaked, slapping her hands over her cheeks. *Oh no!* she thought. *The Reines must have no idea where I am!*

As if reading Claire's mind, Lui said, "Don't worry. We sent a messenger to the Reines." She poured Claire a cup of herbal tea and set it before her.

"Thank you," Claire said with a deep bow. "And I'm sorry for all the trouble! Really, I'm ever so mortified right now."

As Claire lifted her head, her eyes met Lui's. The knight shook her head and smiled gently. The morning sunlight shining on her black hair made Lui look more handsome than ever.

Claire took the cup and inhaled, letting its scent help clear her muzzy head.

Once Lui saw Claire pick up the cup, she casually said, "So, Claire. You're from the distinguished Martino family in Noston?"

Claire jolted. "Did I say that last night?"

"Yes," said Lui. "But don't worry. We all easily accepted it. You certainly seem like a noblewoman, after all." She smiled and then made direct eye contact with Claire. "You may not have said as much, but it was apparent enough from the moment we met. You needn't worry; we don't think you were trying to deceive us. If anything, our concern is for how hard this must have been for you."

Claire's eyes immediately filled with tears. Why were they all being so kind to her?

Lui passed Claire her handkerchief and said, "I told you before that although Vik is two years younger than me, we were so close growing up that we were almost like brother and sister, correct?"

"Yes. I remember."

"He may be my lord, but my prince will always be like a little brother to me."

"I can definitely picture that," Claire said. She couldn't help but giggle as she remembered their many conversations playing out in the usual fashion—Lui assuming the role of the cool, collected older sister and Vik that of the rowdier younger brother.

"Vik has always lived with the heavy responsibility of being our prince. We all

want to lessen his burden, but it is—and always will be—impossible for us.” She locked eyes with Claire again and continued, “There will come a day when Vik needs someone just like you, and when it arrives, I ask that you help in whatever way you can.”

“Yes, of course,” Claire answered. “That is, if I’m able to be of any help.” Lui had spoken to her half as Vik’s friend, half as his loyal servant. Yet Claire was surprised that she, reduced to being the disgraced daughter of a duke, could answer without any hesitation. *Oh?* she thought. *Am I...?* She squeezed the handkerchief in her hand.

Lui had greeted Vik in his office two hours previously, at 6 a.m. “Good morning, Your Highness. For what matter have you summoned me so early in the morning?”

“Today, I am changing the schedule to send out Keith and Denis. Lui, you will remain here.”

“As you command,” she easily accepted, as if she had expected this order.

Vik laid the schedule down on the desk before him and said, “More importantly, Lui—you already knew about Claire’s background.”

“How could I have?” she asked. Lui turned to look out the window, dodging his accusation.

“Considering how knowledgeable you are about magic, I wouldn’t believe for an instant that you don’t know about the Martino family. After you met her and saw the sheer strength of the magic Claire received at her baptism, couldn’t you have put two and two together?”

Rather than criticizing her for hiding something from him, Vik sounded as petulant as a child upset at being left out of a game. Nonchalantly, Lui remarked, “As your friend, I deemed it best not to tell you. That was my sole reason.”

“You’re saying it was for my benefit?”

“Keith appears to have his own concerns, and I’m sure that knowing her background will present him with several options to approach those matters.

However, I was thinking of the future, and I thought you both needed more time to learn about each other as people first. Isn't Claire proof of that?" She smiled at him, teasingly.

Vik remained silent for a few seconds. As a resigned expression overtook his features, he muttered, "I can never beat you."

"That's because we've been friends for many years." Lui grinned at him, pleased.

"I'm going to trust you to handle Claire today."

"As you command."

Relieved by her response, Vik left the office.

Several weeks had passed since the to-do in the bar and Claire's subsequent awakening in the palace. She woke up one morning with an unexplainable, heavy anxiety in the pit of her stomach. *I don't understand what I'm so concerned about*, she thought. *It's almost like I have this vague premonition that something bad is going to happen.*

The past few weeks, Claire had been busy ruing her actions of that evening; in one fell swoop, all the self-control she had exhibited in her life thus far had been shattered. Vik continued to visit her room several times a week, and little about their time spent together then had changed. Likewise, he never once asked her about the Martino family. When Claire had apologized to him for hiding her background, he'd only grinned at her and said, "Don't worry about it! I mean, I did the same to you."

Later that day during a break at school, Lydia sat down next to Claire with a sigh.

"Whatever is the matter, Lady Lydia?" Claire asked.

"Lady Claire, I fear I've been terribly uneasy about something all morning. I cannot shake the feeling that something dreadful is going to happen."

Claire's heart lurched. "You too?" she asked. "Why, but I feel the same way."

Just as Claire spoke, Denis, Keith, and Lui rushed into the classroom shouting,

“Your Highness!” These knights of the royal guard and retainers to the crown prince were held in such high regard by the students—especially the boys of the school—that their popularity overshadowed that of the royal family. The Academy’s classrooms and corridors were already abuzz with excitement over the trio’s rare guest appearance.

“What’s going on?” Vik asked, noting their worried looks.

All three exchanged glances and then looked back at him. Keith whispered something in Vik’s ear; the latter’s expression remained stoic.

I wonder what’s happening, Claire thought. After a few more seconds of whispering, Vik leapt to his feet and gathered up his things to go back to the palace. Just then, Lui caught Claire’s eye and mouthed the words, “And bring Claire.” Vik hesitated for a moment but nodded.

Claire was only puzzled further, but Lydia, who had been attentively watching, remarked, “Could this be...?”

At the same time, Vik called out to Claire, “I need to return to the palace immediately. It’s an emergency. Will you join me?” The buzz of gossip in the classroom rose to a roar.

Her friends’ unmistakable alarm spurred her to immediately reply, “Yes, I shall accompany you.”

“Let us use a teleportation spell, Your Highness,” Keith suggested. This was the first time Claire had ever seen Keith—head of the knights—look so agitated.

“No, we mustn’t,” said Vik. “I don’t know how long it would take for Lui to recover her strength afterwards, and I can’t allow unnecessary risks until I have a better understanding of the situation.”

Teleportation was a very high-level magic, and even a powerful mage required a fair deal of time to recuperate after casting such a spell.

“Very well,” Lui said. “We still have enough time to ride back on our horses.” She tried to look calm, but sweat glinted on her cheeks.

Even the eternally cheerful Denis sounded less optimistic as he said, “Sounds good to me.” Claire knew that Paffuto must be in grave danger indeed. She and

the other four urged their horses to gallop as fast as they could back to the palace.

Compared to Claire's visit a few weeks earlier, the castle was in a state of total uproar. "I'll tell you all what's going on as soon as I get back," Vik called as he sprang off the horse. "Wait for me!" He dashed off to the king's office.

Claire, left to wait for him in a drawing room, could not relax. She moved to the window and looked out, whereupon she saw the clear sky outside beginning to darken. *I know what this is*, she thought.

A scene from an afternoon in Claire's early childhood came to mind. She was sitting in the lap of her now deceased grandmother, soaking up the pleasantly warm sun and reading a picture book with an illustration of a dark vortex of clouds.

"Grandma Florence," Claire asked, puzzling over the strange illustration. "What's this picture?"

"That, my dear, is called a tornado," said her grandmother.

"A tor-na-do?"

"Yes. It is a very frightening thing that lifts people and houses up into the air and destroys them."

"It can destroy buildings? That's scary, grandma!"

It lifts people and houses up into the air and destroys them. Claire shivered in fright.

"Indeed it is," her grandmother agreed. "There are small and large tornadoes alike, and the large ones could destroy even an entire kingdom. But you needn't fear, my dear." She smiled gently and turned the page to reveal an illustration of a girl standing on a hilltop and wreathed in light. "The girl in this picture is your grandma when I was very young. Here I am making the tornado go away by purifying the air."

"Pu-ri-fy-ing?" Claire repeated.

"Yes indeed. It requires a great amount of power and very, very hard work.

But I'm sure you will be able to do it someday as well."

Little Claire nodded.

The Claire of the present day snapped out of her reverie as Vik and Lui dashed up to her.

"Claire, I'm sorry for bringing you here with no prior warning," Vik said.

"Think nothing of it," she said. "I am here to help you in whatever way I can."

"Thank you. Right now, it looks like we're about to experience the largest magical tornado in history."

Claire gasped as parallel thoughts—*I knew it! No, I don't want it to be true!*—warred within her.

When magical spells, such as teleportation, were used, the resulting magic byproduct could potentially turn corrupt and form what was commonly known as a magical tornado. These enormous twisters were seldom generated now that the land was not at war, but a single tornado could last for more than a day and threaten to obliterate entire towns or kingdoms. Claire knew of them in name only, as she had neither seen nor heard of any forming in all of her nearly seventeen years of life.

"I've had a bad feeling all morning that some magic has gone awry somewhere," Lui added rapidly. "According to the court mage's inquiry, a magical tornado will likely form east of here within the next hour."

Claire nodded and asked, "So what can I do?"

"We are asking all strong magic users to erect a defensive shield under which we'll have our citizens take shelter. We've already begun guiding them to the location. If possible, we would like to protect the entire kingdom under this barrier, but we aren't sure if we have enough power to scale up that far. We'd like you to help us make this barrier as large as possible," said Vik.

His answer startled Claire, who hadn't expected such a solution. "May I ask if this is how you normally deal with tornadoes?"

"No. We have practically no precedent for this because we've only ever had a

small tornado every ten years or so. Decades ago, we created a similar shield when one formed near our border with Noston. However, the records only say that the tornado vanished before it could harm anyone or any village. Beyond that, we have no detailed records of anything prior to a few hundred years ago.”

Claire was alarmed. She didn’t know if she would be capable, but she had no time to waste worrying. Instead, she made up her mind and said, “Vik, I may be able to disperse the tornado altogether.”

Both Vik and Lui gasped, their faces quickly changing from grim to shocked. “Is that true?” he asked.

“Yes,” Claire said. “My grandmother had silver magic, the most powerful magical color in the world.”

“Silver!” Admiration shone in Lui’s eyes.

“I once read in a picture book that my grandmother had been able to stop a tornado when she was a girl. She told me that she did it by purifying the air.”

“Air purification,” Lui mused. “Yes, that does seem probable, if one has strong enough magic.”

“Yet, even if that is possible,” Vik pointed out, “that would place a tremendous burden on you, Claire.”

“It would, but now is not the time to worry about that. As the prince, your top concern right now must be protecting your kingdom and its people,” responded Claire.

Vik was taken aback by the conviction in her words. “You’re right,” he said. “Now I can truly see that you’re the Duke Martino’s daughter.”

“Is now really the time to talk about this?” Claire found herself grimacing as the topic the two had been avoiding for the past several weeks surfaced in this unexpected fashion.

Watching their conversation, Lui stepped in to hurry Vik along. “Your Highness, grant her your permission. We have no time.”

“Very well. Claire, this is up to you. Once Lui finishes reporting this to the king,

I will have her join the court mage in preparing the shield. It's not that I don't trust in you and your power, but I want to have a backup plan."

"As you command," Lui said, and she turned away.

Vik took Claire by the hand and led her out onto the balcony where the sky had grown noticeably darker even during their short conversation. A dark, swirling cloud due east of the capital was beginning to form, its size betraying that it was no ordinary tornado.

"This is dreadful," Vik murmured. He noticed Claire trembling with fear and told her with confidence, "Don't worry. The evacuation is well underway, and even if your plan doesn't work, Lui and the court mage will be able to put up a strong shield."

His hand was still in hers. "You seem every bit a prince right now," she told him.

"Where'd that come from?" Vik asked. Even as sweat ran down his cheeks, he feigned being as calm as ever, which helped Claire feel just the slightest bit calmer herself.

Think about purification magic, she implored herself. Coincidentally, Claire had covered this topic just the other day during her private lessons with a mage at the Academy. Even though purification was quite a high-level skill, she'd managed to do it properly, all on the first try. *Although, that was only on a pitiful, sickly flower, not a huge tornado like this,* she thought. *But I have no choice but to try!*

Claire closed her eyes and let the magic well up inside of her. An aura began to radiate from her, spreading to the ends of each strand of hair as well as the tips of her fingers and toes. She envisioned the storybook she had read with her grandmother and, listening to the beat of her heart, recited the words of her contract with the spirits. "Oh spirits, in exchange for my power, I beseech you to purify this sky!"



In that same instant, the world was shrouded with a veil of blindingly bright light. Though the light emanated from Claire, it traveled at such speeds that it enveloped the world as far as the eye could see in a single moment, blanketing the castle balcony, the city streets, the nearby villages, and all the way to the farthest ends of the kingdom. Within the blink of an eye, the light diffused through the warped magic and transformed the dark clouds into a rainbow of sparkling particles. All this hadn't taken so much as a second, but a true, single moment in time. So powerful and ephemeral was this light that if Vik had not been standing at her side, he would never have known that it came from Claire.

Then, all of Claire's strength left her, and she collapsed into Vik's arms. "Claire!" he cried. As exhausted of power as she was, she couldn't even keep her eyes open long enough to see if the spell had worked.

"I knew it. Back here again," Minami muttered as the desk lamp swam into view. She wasn't even surprised at this point. She was back—back in her uncomfortable bed, back in her own simple bedroom, the likes of which could never exist in Claire's world.

In front of her sat Riko, her back to Minami, immersed once more in the game of that world she'd just come from. "Ooh," Riko whined. "I wish there was a Lui route. She's so dreamy!"

Minami happened to glance down at the table and saw the *Upstart: Eternal Love* book lying next to a plate with a few remaining caramel nuts and pieces of dried fruit. *This must be the same day as last time*, she thought. *It doesn't seem like more than a few hours have passed.*

"I wonder if the magic worked," Minami mumbled to herself. If this followed the same pattern as the last two times, then she could count on being back to her normal world within a few minutes. However, she didn't have a few minutes to spare. She needed to know the results of the spell as soon as possible.

Riko overheard Minami's whisper and turned to look over her shoulder. "Hm?" she said. "Yeah, it did."

"Huh?" What was Riko talking about?

“I thought you were asleep. Sorry, I started playing before you,” Riko said. “Anyway, you’re talking about the part where you reencounter Prince Vik on Lindel Island and accept his invitation to go to Paffuto, right? Then, when you’re staying in the palace, there’s this bit where a huge tornado forms. But the main character’s magic works! There aren’t any choices there that lead to a bad end, so it’s okay! She puts up a big shield, barely anyone gets hurt, and they have this big ball to celebrate. And then you get popularity points with the prince!”

Minami was astonished at how Riko’s account of events differed from reality. Once she overcame this initial shock, she reconsidered the issue and realized, *I must be living in a timeline where the player character chose Asbert.*

Riko went to save and noticed the old save data still untouched. “Wait, Minami, have you not played Asbert’s route yet? I made you a save and everything,” she pouted.

“No, for some reason, I just don’t feel like playing it,” Minami said. After all, she had lived through those same events from a very different perspective.

“Yeah, I guess that makes sense,” Riko said. “It’s really apparent in this route how shitty the main character is. You have to try to seduce your brother, and then you have to steal all of Claire’s friends. But those are the things that make it fun! Should I delete the save, then?”

“Nah, no need. You can hold onto it for now.” She didn’t know why, but she had the feeling that Riko shouldn’t delete that data.

My eyelids are growing heavier by the minute, she thought. *I must be getting ready to return to my world soon.* “Riko,” she said, “I’m going to take another nap.”

“Yeah, you do that. Nighty night!” Riko turned back to the monitor, already enthralled in the game again. Then, just as she had hoped, Minami sunk into a deep slumber.

Meanwhile, back in Noston, in a room on the southern end of the Aristocratic Royal Academy’s three-story school building, Charlotte slouched in a very regal chair. Only a few months ago, Prince Asbert had occupied this, the presiding seat in the student council room. Charlotte had dreamed of taking his place,

and yet despite her dream coming true, she fumed with indignation. *No one ever told me it would involve all this!* she glowered. *I didn't steal Asbert away from Claire just to be stuck here doing paperwork!*

This was *not* what Charlotte had envisioned. She had begun deliberately planting awful rumors in the ears of Asbert and his entourage, all the while feigning that it was accidental. Naturally, no one had believed them at first, but making everyone come around was a simple enough matter. How fortunate that Charlotte could interweave her white magic into her words! No one was any the wiser as the flowers of distrust aimed at Claire began to bloom one by one. The most beautiful blossom of all would unfurl its petals, Charlotte plotted, on the day of Asbert's graduation.

However, her dreams had been dashed the night before the ceremony when she'd visited Claire's rooms after supper and found them deserted. The suite was neat as a pin, as Claire had the *infuriatingly* well-mannered sense to tidy up after herself everywhere she went. As Charlotte wept crocodile tears for the benefit of her cronies, she thought to herself, *She got the better of me again!*

Charlotte well remembered the first time she had met Claire. As a child, Claire had light brown hair the soft color of milk tea, long eyelashes, and rosy cheeks. She wore a perfectly becoming light-blue dress, edged in voluminous quantities of expensive lace. Everything, from her impeccable posture to her smile that positively overflowed with refinement, emphasized to Charlotte—young though she was—the obvious difference in their social statuses. Charlotte felt like she was meeting a true princess straight out of a storybook.

Unfortunately, life had not been so kind to little Charlotte, who'd grown up in a hamlet far from Tillard as the lowly daughter of a duke's mistress. Her father the duke sent her mother funds for Charlotte's upbringing, but the girl did not find out until her teens that her mother had squandered much of this money away. As a child yet unaware of this fact, it did not take young Charlotte long to resent saintly, smiling Claire who had never tasted poverty or lacked for anything.

My father and siblings all doted on me when I was little, but my grandmother always kept her distance. Talk about playing favorites! That's right—Claire always was her favorite. Claire was always ragging on me for everything I did—

my manners, my word choice, my topics of conversation at tea parties. She must have loved to shame me! She had everything she could ever want, even a prince as a fiancé! I can't stand her!

It was impressive how well Charlotte hid her fervent desire to move up in the world behind a charming smile. Anyone would be repulsed had they a glimpse of her true nature; she was, in sum, rotten to the core.

“Why do I have to deal with this mountain of paperwork?” Charlotte grumbled as she sat in the empty council room in front of a massive stack of overdue paperwork. “I didn’t steal this position just to play government!”

Charlotte had planned to steal Claire’s fiancé, rooms, and position as future student council president, but that didn’t mean she wanted to do any of the work—that, naturally, could be left for Claire. All Charlotte wanted was to live Claire’s life vicariously and be the one to draw jealous looks from their aristocratic classmates. However, now that Asbert had graduated and was far too busy to see her often, she had little opportunity to show him off to her friends. Then, since Claire had vanished before Charlotte could foist all the work off on her, all these tedious duties had now fallen into Charlotte’s own lap. Charlotte couldn’t even be bothered to keep her new quarters tidy, and the flowers on the balcony had long since withered and died.

Overhearing Charlotte’s outburst, Jon and Caroline, the student council vice president and secretary, poked their heads in with quizzical expressions. “Is anything the matter, Miss Charlotte?” Jon asked.

Charlotte immediately snapped out of her snarl and adopted a pitiful look. “It is nothing,” she said. “Pray, don’t let it concern you. I was only thinking that all these documents are ever so hard to do on my own.”

The confusion vanished from Jon’s face. He lightly shook his head and said, “Nonsense, you’ve looked pale since yesterday. Do let me finish up for you. Miss Caroline, would you be so kind as to see after some tea for Miss Charlotte?”

“Are you unwell, Lady Charlotte?” Caroline chimed in. “Please, do take a rest here on the couch. I will have the tea for you at once.”

Charlotte looked only a little frail, and yet the others rushed to her attention.

She thought to herself, *How easy people are to trick. Who needs intellectual conversations and fine manners?* She settled back on the sofa, and a mean grin spread across her face as she watched Jon and Caroline bustle about, he working to finish the paperwork and she rushing to make tea.

Once Caroline returned to Charlotte with the tea, she said, "That reminds me. My lady, did you not mention having a headache a few days ago?"

"Indeed I did," Charlotte said. "I'm so sorry that it meant I fell behind on the student council work." Charlotte was a habitual skiver, but she really had felt unwell several days previously.

Caroline frowned with deep compassion. "I heard from my father that there was an omen of a magical tornado, the largest one in history, forming near the capital of Paffuto. Considering how magically gifted you are, perhaps that is what caused your headache."

Jon looked up from his papers and added, "Yes, I had word from my lord father as well. If the tornado had fully formed, we might have also been caught up in the damage. The whole castle was in a state of high alarm due to the omen. I suppose His Majesty the King and His Highness Prince Asbert had prepared some sort of countermeasure, but I'm sure Miss Charlotte would know the details better than I."

Both he and Caroline looked straight at Charlotte, eyes full of veneration for their future queen.

However, Charlotte hadn't received word of anything, not even that this crisis in the making had occurred. She could have sidestepped any suspicion from the two by suggesting any sort of reasonable plan, but Jon's and Caroline's fathers were cabinet ministers. She sensed that telling a lie could only cause trouble for her later down the line and thus elected to play off of Asbert's affection.

"Asbert is always sending me presents and letters, but, well, I'm afraid I haven't heard from him in days. I know he's ever so busy, but I don't know the particulars." She punctuated this with a pitiful smile for good measure.

Moved, Jon cried, "Oh, there's no need to look so sad, Miss Charlotte! It's only because His Highness has you for support that he can devote such unwavering attention to his work as he does."

In all actuality, Charlotte barely received letters from Asbert to begin with.

Caroline returned to an earlier point in the conversation and remarked, “It *is* a relief that the tornado never fully formed, isn’t it?”

“Indeed,” said Jon. “According to my lord father, the tornado was purified in Paffuto just before it touched down.”

“My, how wonderful! Paffuto must have a family as distinguished in magic as our Martinos,” Caroline gushed, shooting Charlotte an admiring glance as she did so.

“It was purified?” Charlotte repeated, stunned. Purification was such high-level magic that even Charlotte would struggle to purify the air—as she was now fully aware, having been forced since her baptism to study magic far past the point that she cared to. She didn’t know of even a single mage powerful enough to shoot a purification spell up into the air and have it cleanse the whole sky.

If anyone could do it, she mused, then it would be... That line of thought was interrupted by the memory of the letter left for Claire by her deceased mother. *No*, she reminded herself. *Leo should have destroyed that.* As Charlotte sipped her tea, she forgot to keep the smile plastered over her face.

When Claire awoke, she found herself in the same room she had been taken to after her overdrinking incident. As her awareness came back in bits and pieces, she had enough presence of mind to wonder, *What happened to the magical tornado?*

The room was deserted apart from her. Claire wanted to get up, but her whole body felt as heavy as lead; she couldn’t move a muscle. *I can’t speak either*, she realized. Fortunately, the bed curtains were open, allowing her, after mustering all her energy, to turn her heavy head and look out the window. She couldn’t tell how much time had passed, but the sky outside was as blue and bright as it ever was. Likewise, the bad feeling she had felt prior to losing consciousness was gone. *Does that mean my spell worked?* she wondered. Relieved, Claire succumbed to the leaden feeling of her body and fell back asleep once more.

Claire felt something damp splash across her cheek. She cracked open her eyelids and saw Lui bending over her, a wet towel in hand.

“Claire!” Lui cried. “Oh, you’re awake!” She enfolded Claire in a tight hug.

Claire managed to groan out, “Yes, I am.”

“I’m so very happy to see that. I’m sorry I wasn’t able to help you.”

Seeing the normally collected Lui become so emotional brought warm tears to Claire’s own eyes.

“Did the spell...work?” she asked.

“Yes, it did,” came Vik’s voice behind Lui. “It worked perfectly.”

Claire looked around Lui’s shoulder and saw Keith and Denis as well. Concerned, Keith told her, “You’ve been asleep for three days now.”

“That long?” she said. “My goodness.”

“You collapsed on the balcony,” Vik explained, coming to sit next to the bed to take a better look at her. “How do you feel?” She could see the worry vanish from his eyes to be replaced by their usual gentle calm.

“We’ll be waiting in the next room over,” Lui said. “Call us if he tries anything, Claire.” The three knights walked out, exchanging grins as they went.

“Try anything, my foot,” Vik grumbled. “I’ll have you know I’m a perfect gentleman.”

Claire giggled.

“Don’t you start laughing at me too.”

“I’m laughing because I’m so happy, Vik,” she said. Claire felt relieved that her friends, who had up to now been dashing about with grim faces, could sit and have a relaxing conversation. Above all else, it overjoyed her to know that she had saved the pleasant, peaceful ambience of Paffuto.

“Are you?” he said. He gave her a gentle smile and then, after a few moments, looked away. Unable to meet her eyes, Vik confessed, “The king has requested an audience with you.”

“What?” Claire squawked. “Me?”

“You’re the heroine who saved Paffuto. I’m not exaggerating; the situation was really that dire. The king wants to thank you for your efforts.”

“Very well,” she agreed. “When does His Majesty wish to see me? I’d best get ready at once.” She tried to scramble up and out of bed, but her body balked, weakened by her long sleep.

Shyly helping Claire as she wobbled to her feet, Vik said, “As the Crown Prince, I intend to propose he grant you a title along with the position of court mage.”

Claire quivered, puzzled at Vik’s words. “Whatever do you mean?” she asked. “I have no need of titles. As for being a mage? I am sure this success was simply a fluke.”

“If you become a noble, then you will have an armed guard,” said Vik. “Likewise, you will be granted a room in the palace once you become a court mage.”

Vik sounded almost desperate, making Claire more confused by the moment. “Vik, I don’t understand what you’re implying.”

He paused for a moment and then finally admitted, “To tell you the truth, I’m worried about you.” Judging that he’d make no headway otherwise, Vik began to explain his reasoning. “To be specific, I am concerned about the families who helped destroy Lindel. We recently reopened the investigation, but the tragedy was forty years ago, so we haven’t uncovered anything new. If, perhaps, your mother’s death was no accident, then I sense that someone wants very badly to hide that you ever existed.”

Vik’s grip tightened, and he continued with more strength in his voice. “This person knows that your mother, the last surviving princess, married into the Martino family. Claire, you are the only person in the world who could have purified the largest magical tornado in history. I may be worrying over nothing, and I hope I am. However, I fear that once your enemies get wind of this, they’ll set their sights directly on you.”

“I understand what you’re saying,” Claire replied, “but isn’t this all a thing of

the past? It has been over a decade since I lost my lady mother, and besides, I know absolutely nothing about any of this.”

“Only your enemy can say for sure that it’s over. I, for one, am not willing to take any chances.” Vik hesitated momentarily and then looked straight into her eyes. “Claire, I understand that you don’t want to be a part of the ruling class anymore. But please, at least let me help you.”

Claire was at a loss for words, overwhelmed by Vik’s frank discussion and direct eye contact. An opportune knock on the door spared her from having to answer. Keith stuck his head in with an apologetic look and said, “Claire, your audience with the king will be in thirty minutes. Do you have enough time to get ready?”

“Yes, but of course,” she responded. “Yet I’m afraid I have nothing to wear, save for my school uniform. I do hope it won’t be taken as rude.”

Vik rose from the bedside as if to convey to Keith that he had just interrupted something. “That will be fine,” Vik finally said. “The king is aware you’ve only just woken up, but he wanted to convey his gratitude nevertheless.”

“Very well,” she said. “Then I shall attend to my toilette at once.”

Thank goodness Keith came in when he did, Claire added to herself. That conversation must have been the “anything” the prince’s retainers had mentioned.

As things stood right now, Claire lacked a patron. *Had I not been the disgraced daughter of a duke from a neighboring land, I wonder if we all would have ended up closer.* No matter how stifling her old life had been, and how much she had longed to be free, she sometimes missed it ever so slightly.

After making herself presentable, Claire took Lui’s arm and let herself be led to the grand, ornately decorated door of the king’s audience chamber. Once there, Claire let go of Lui and continued on her own unsteady legs.

“Will you be all right, Claire?” Lui asked, watching her with worried eyes. “Only His Highness will be allowed to enter with you.”

“I don’t mind,” Claire said. Shaking off the last of her wobbliness, she straightened up and stood tall. Although she knew how to address a king

holding an audience, Claire had never experienced this herself. However, her pride as a young noblewoman would never let her be seen before him with her legs shivering from either nerves or fatigue.

At a signal, the doors opened, and Claire followed Vik into the audience room. Their footsteps echoed off the marble walls and floors as they walked the length of the chamber to a raised dais upon which the king sat on his throne.

“You performed truly admirably in this calamity,” the king spoke. “As sovereign of this nation, I wish to convey my gratitude.”

“You are too kind, Your Majesty,” Claire said, as she swept into a deep bow. “Your words honor me.”

“It cannot be comfortable to bow so,” he replied. “Come, child. Lift your head and be at ease.”

“Your consideration for your humble subject’s comfort is truly admirable, Your Majesty. Thank you.” She lifted her head as he had instructed and smiled. Now that Claire met his eyes, she realized they were the same color as Vik’s.

“My, my,” said the king, impressed. “Your manners are impeccable. I hear you come from a noble family in Noston.”

“That is correct, Your Majesty, although I fear I was disowned for my many shortcomings.”

“Really now?” The king and Vik exchanged sympathetic glances. “Then, in honor of saving my kingdom in its time of need, I shall grant you a reward. Tell me anything you wish, and you will have it.”

Claire, who had expected this question or something like it, answered without hesitation. “I am perfectly content to continue to live in Paffuto as I have. I could want for nothing more.”

The king gave her an odd look. “My, my,” he said. “I heard that our own Crown Prince would like you to be given a title in my court.”

“Truly, I am happy enough living as I am,” Claire insisted. “When I chose to dispel the tornado, I did so only to protect my good friends and my home.”

At Claire’s side, Vik ribbed her under his breath, “What a goody-two-shoes

answer!”

Feigning indifference, she whispered back, “But it’s true!”

The king watched this exchange carefully, his eyes widening. “Keith informed me that our heroine of the hour was Vik’s good friend, but I was unaware that you two got along so splendidly.”

We’re giving him the absolutely wrong idea! Claire thought, but she hadn’t the courage to deny the king to his face.

“You needn’t make a request immediately,” he added. “Feel free to think it over.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty,” she said. “You are most kind.”

The king nodded contentedly and then rose from his throne. As he departed, he called, “Vik, I am adjusting the plans for the ball I’m hosting at the end of next month. I would like for you to handle the guest list. That will be your reward for your good conduct in this episode.”

Vik waited a moment before saying, “As you command.”

Claire raised her head to check that the king was gone and then asked, “What is happening next month?”

Vik reddened. “Nothing,” he said. “You’ll see. Anyway, Claire, the king seems very taken with you.”

Claire looked at him in confusion. She didn’t have the slightest idea what he meant.

The next day, Claire arrived at the school gates earlier than usual. The moment Lydia saw her, she dashed up and cried out, “Lady Claire! Are you well enough to be back to school already?”

“Yes, I am,” Claire said. She bowed her head to her friend. “Thank you for your concern and for sending me those lovely flowers and baked goodies.”

While the news about Claire’s involvement in disbanding the tornado was not widely known, Lydia had heard about it from her father, a cabinet minister. Therefore, when Claire arrived home at the Reines’ yesterday, she found a pile

of get-well presents waiting for her, courtesy of Lydia. Lydia had arranged the flowers herself, and after having them in her room for only a single night, Claire already felt much stronger.

“Oh, think nothing of it,” Lydia said. “Actually, Lady Claire, I was hoping that I could ask you a few questions about Noston if you ever have the time.” She gave Claire a knowing smile. Like Vik, Lydia seemed to know this was territory Claire was hesitant to touch on and was considerate enough to handle it with caution. Vik, Lui, Keith, Denis, the Reines—having met so many excellent individuals made her feel that Paffuto was a wonderful place indeed.

Claire had been quite concerned about how Lydia might have taken the little fib that she’d told when they first met, claiming to be “from the north,” and what Lydia might think of her in light of the recent incident. Much to Claire’s delight, Lydia sensed her apprehension too, and hadn’t waited until Claire’s return to school before sending a gift. Claire wanted to thank her for this as soon as she could, so she took both of Lydia’s hands in her own, squeezed them, and said, “Of course! I would be delighted.”

The two girls had hardly even stepped through the gates when who should appear before them but Nicola, puffing and painting. “Hey... Wait, Lady...Claire!” she said, pausing to catch her breath. “Did I...hear this right? You’re not...from Paffuto? I suppose that makes sense...considering I didn’t recognize your name.” Had she spotted Claire from a distance and come running up?

“Good morning, Lady Nicola,” Claire said, giving her a winsome smile. “I thought I was known only as ‘that girl’ to you, but I’m pleased to see you finally learned my name.”

Nicola reddened. “How dare you!” she cried. She spun on her heel, making her followers jump, and stomped away without saying another word. Her followers hurried to excuse themselves before Lydia and Claire and then ran off after their mistress.

Lydia shook her head and murmured, “I wonder what in the world that was about. Lady Nicola has been in such a vile temper recently that I fear she’s on the warpath again.”

Claire watched Nicola's retreating figure and said, "But she certainly seems like a pleasant young lady in some respects, so one can't truly dislike her."

"I agree. She reminds me of my dear pet dog. They share the same brown, fluffy hair and tend to yap in much the same way."

"Really now?" Claire giggled.

"That isn't polite of you, Miss Lydia," said a voice behind them. The girls spun around and saw Vik standing there, trying to suppress a grin.

"Your Highness!" Lydia cried.

"Nicola knows the full details of the tornado incident. As a member of the royal family, she ought to be grateful to Claire, but she's too proud to say as much outright. Try to be sympathetic, would you?"

Vik's friends standing around behind him likewise struggled to suppress their own smirks. Claire guessed that they probably felt similarly about Nicola as she and Lydia did. She smiled and nodded.

Unruffled, Lydia calmly replied, "My father informs me that Your Highness is the cause of Lady Nicola's discontent to begin with. Do please handle that yourself."

Vik's shoulders conspicuously stiffened. Lydia rarely ever talked to Vik, as eager as she was to avoid the fuss of his followers, but now they were bantering like a couple of old friends. What could this mean?

Vik did not respond to Lydia and instead addressed Claire with concern. "Don't push yourself too hard today, all right?"

What is going on? Claire thought, as she beheld this unnatural situation.

Once Vik left and was a safe distance away, Lydia whispered to Claire, "Lady Claire, surely you've heard of the ball to be held next month."

The king did mention that, Claire recalled. "Yes," she said, "I have heard of it, although I know little about it."

"My father says that this ball is for His Highness Prince Vik to look for a bride."

Claire's voice sounded shrill to her own ears as she said, "He's looking for a

bride?”

“Rumor has it that Lady Nicola has had such a temper as of late because she was excluded from the guest list, even though she is the prince’s cousin. Certainly, she is of high enough rank to attend, so this suggests the prince is purposefully excluding her.”

Claire looked at Vik off in the distance. The whole world felt like it was spinning around her, and she tried to convince herself that this was only because she was walking.

She decided to voice the question that had been plaguing her for a while. “Doesn’t the prince have a fiancée?”

“No, he does not. As in Noston, most Paffish noblemen become engaged in childhood, but His Highness has always been highly sought-after, both in Paffuto and abroad. As you can surely tell by how ruthlessly Lady Nicola was culled from the list of potential suitors, His Majesty the King is firm in his conviction to never accept any young woman who is an unsuitable match or lacks the proper background.”

Claire forced herself to smile to hide the shock she felt. “I see,” she said. “That certainly makes sense.”

“Of course,” Lydia continued, “this does not mean that the prince is to be married straightaway. There will still be a few years, at the very earliest, before his wedding. Yet the crown prince is to have his coronation next year, so it must be time to start thinking about the future.”

Claire listened as Lydia mused out loud. “I suppose I shall be invited to the ball, or rather, I suppose every young noblewoman in schools like ours all over the country will be. Purely as a bystander, I suppose it will be a fun event. However, it saddens me to think of the poor prince who must only consider his future and cannot marry the woman he loves!” Lydia looked straight at Claire as if she wanted to add something further but said no more.

Several days later, a letter from the palace arrived at the Reine household. The seal on the envelope and the light green card inside were the very same as the one embossed on the pocket watch Vik had lent Claire. It was plainly an

invitation for Isabella to attend the ball.

Quaking, Isabella asked, “Claire, is this what I think it is?”

“Yes indeed,” Baron Reine beamed. “It is an invitation to attend the ball where His Royal Highness will choose a bride.” His smile, while admitting nothing outright, strongly suggested the baron’s desire for his daughter to accept the invitation.

“I can’t go!” Isabella cried. “I can’t possibly go to a ball hosted by the *king*.”

“You will be more than all right, Miss Isabella,” Claire said, trying to soothe the girl who clung to her in tears. “I will teach you all of the appropriate etiquette.”

Here Marie cut in. “Isabella, you must understand that we are not telling you to try to compete for the prince’s hand. You are being asked there purely for the fun of it! Know your place as the daughter of a nouveau riche baron.”

“Mother...” Isabella breathed.

The Reines did not tolerate any of their child’s self-centered desires. Thus, Isabella was forced to attend the ball against her will, and she and Claire doubled down on their etiquette lessons.

Meanwhile, Vik and his three knights had managed to catch a break in Keith’s room where they presently drank and played cards. Busy as they were, they had few opportunities to chat as a group, so the conversation naturally turned to Claire.

“Well, I’m out!” Denis cried. He slapped his hand of cards down and then likewise flopped back on the bed. “So, Vik, how’s the whole bride thing going?”

“I have my father’s permission, and I want to send Claire an invitation. Though, I haven’t gotten around to it yet.” The king had been extraordinarily taken with her in his audience the other day. Originally, this ball had been intended to help Vik find a future bride. But because the list of attendees was decided upon according to the senate’s wishes, and this body was comprised of high-ranking aristocrats, the guest list consisted solely of young noblewomen. However, by entrusting the matter to Vik, the king made all too clear his desire

to let Vik invite Claire. *My father knows everything*, Vik thought. The idea didn't amuse him, and he felt frustrated that he couldn't oppose his father even this one time.

"Still, I'm glad that the king thinks so highly of Claire, even if she does have no patron. That's one less worry for me as your retainer," Keith said. It had left a sour taste in his mouth to encourage Vik to consider Claire's status when choosing a queen, even though he, personally, would have loved for Claire to be with Vik if there were no other obstacles.

"But you still haven't told her how you feel about her, have you?" asked Lui.

Vik choked on his drink and accidentally spat it out before glaring at Lui with a look that advised her to mind her own business.

"Wait, seriously? What are you thinking, man?" Denis howled. "I mean, everyone on the guest list already knows who you're going to pick, but you haven't even told Claire you like her? You! Are! Un! Be! Lie! Va! Ble!" The last words were punctuated by Denis thrashing across the card-strewn bed.

"At this rate, she might turn down the invitation," Keith teased.

"It's very possible," said Denis. "Did you know that all the girls I hang around with are dying to get an invitation? Claire's a saint if she's not hounding you for one."

A frown settled on Vik's face as his friends joked around him. Then he finally said, "Hey, Keith. Weren't you trying to discourage me from pursuing her to begin with? Claire says her fiancé back in Noston was the Crown Prince Asbert. I'm sure she's seen plenty of ugliness from these power-hungry people. She doesn't seem to want to work in the palace and even refused a title. What's to stop her from turning me down?"

He downed his glass in a single, forceful jerk. Vik knew well that Claire had been abandoned by the life path that had once been chosen for her and was finally living happily on her own terms. If she were to marry him, would she only long to be free, or would she learn to find happiness by his side? He still did not know the answer.

The scent of jasmine wafted in through the window from the garden, bringing

with it the knowledge that summer had begun. Those simple, happy spring days were over.

On her next day off from school, Claire went into town to meet with Lui. *How rare for Lui to invite me out*, she thought as she traipsed along in a set of masculine boots she'd chosen to match Lui's style.

However, when she arrived at their meeting place, she found Vik cheerfully waiting for her. Surprised, Claire asked, "Vik, why are you here? And why is your hair like that?"

His hair was not its usual blonde, so fine it almost became transparent in the sunlight, but had been dyed the same raven-black color as Lui's. His distinctive eye color and mannerisms let Claire recognize him instantly, but no commoner, she judged, would be able to see through this disguise.

"You really figured me out at first glance, huh?" he said. "Lui cooked it up for me with magic."

"That sounds just like her. You should try that when you take trips abroad as well."

"Taking a trip requires all kinds of prep work," Vik said. He hesitated slightly and then added, "Today's special, you see. You always turn me away so soon after I come to visit you at night, so I had Lui ask you in my stead. I hope that isn't upsetting."

"Not at all. I'm happy to spend time with you." For a split second, her heart swelled in delight, but then it all came crashing down again when she remembered that by next month, Vik would have a fiancée. This fact wounded her more than she could have imagined.

"No, I'm not upset," she continued. "I was also hoping for an opportunity to enjoy your company without being pressed for time." *Because once he decides on a fiancée*, she thought to herself, *I'm sure I'll lose my chances to see him like this*. She put on a smile to try to hide her true feelings.

The two spent the day on a makeshift "date" about town. First, Vik took her to a toy store he had frequently patronized in disguise as a child. Seeing the

shelves filled with toys brought back pleasant memories of his past, and Claire likewise reminisced about playing with her brothers. As Vik had sparred with Keith, Lui, or Denis in the castle yard, so too did Claire remember watching and joining her brothers practice sword fighting on the mansion's grounds. And as she told of how the siblings had nicked one another, so too did Vik recount stories of his childhood injuries. Both Claire and Vik, they learned, had grown up with precious few opportunities to see their respective fathers and thus had thrown themselves into studying school subjects and mastering etiquette to earn their fathers' praise upon the rare occasions that they met.

The weather was fine, so they purchased sandwiches at a bakery—salmon and cheese for Claire and pastrami for Vik—and took them outside to eat. Vik confessed that his favorite food was the simple cheese sandwiches his wet nurse used to make, and Claire began listing all of her favorite foods—everything seafood, pancakes covered in maple syrup—until she finally settled on the answer of having too many likes to choose one favorite.

It was a day of wonderfully enjoyable conversation and plentiful laughter. To end it off, Vik led Claire to one of his favorite spots, a high hill overlooking Wurtz and the castle.

Claire cried in admiration, "How incredible! What a pretty view."

As dusk fell over the town, lamps winked on here and there. The edges of the sky turned a deep, wondrous orange—the color of a sun recently set that heralds the arrival of night. Smoke began to waft from the chimneys of the little houses and shops lining the cobbled streets as their occupants made dinner.

"It almost feels like all of this is a dream," Claire said.

"How so?" asked Vik.

"Just a short time ago, I could never have imagined that such happiness awaited me. But now here we are together."

Vik paused for a few moments before responding. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Yes, of course," Claire answered, in a pleasant mood from reflecting upon this enjoyable day.

"I heard that you used to be engaged to Prince Asbert back when you lived in

Noston.”

Claire’s eyes momentarily widened in shock before she smiled again. “Was that something I said the night I drank too much? How embarrassing.” She paused. “Yes. I was raised in the midst of a power struggle, but I consider it to be far behind me now.”

“I’m really very glad that I came here to Paffuto. You teased me for being a goody-two-shoes when I spoke to the king, but that’s truly how I feel. I’m grateful for all of the kindness that Lui, Keith, and Denis have shown me, and I’m impressed with their dedication to you. You’ve all given me the courage to keep going. So I’m really happy enough that I could protect all of you and *your* happiness from the tornado. I just...wanted to give back to all of you somehow,” Claire said.

Vik almost began to speak but stopped himself.

Unaware of this, Claire continued, “Did you know? The girl I am a governess for, Lady Isabella, received an invitation to the ball next month. I’m not sure how much help I can really be, but I’d like to do what little I can so it’ll all eventually add up into something bigger. My first goal is to make her appearance at the ball a success. She’s such a lovely, regal young lady, but she’s ever so worried about her conduct. Your Highness, if you see her there, will you please be kind to her?”

This was Claire’s very best attempt to keep up her bravest face before Vik. However, in the light of her radiant, almost teasing smile, Vik was powerless to guess Claire’s inner turmoil. He looked up at the darkened sky and answered, “Of course.”

The light green envelope nestled in his pocket never once left its hiding place.

Not long after, a tailor the Reines patronized arrived at the mansion. “My Lady Isabella,” said the tailor, pale-faced and trembling with nerves, “I am still doing my best to complete the pink dress which you ordered for next month’s ball. As you’ve asked me for a fabric sample, I don’t suppose you wish for a different dress?”

Isabella smiled at him innocently. “Oh, don’t worry. I would never do anything

so mean as to ask you to start over. I was only wondering if I could put in an order for a second dress. I'd like it to be for someone who's taller than me, with a refined and clear sense of beauty. What color do you think would work best?"

A month had passed since Claire's fun day on the town with Vik and their dreamy evening spent overlooking Wurtz. Finally, the king's ball was only a day away. Truthfully, it was the king's ball in name only; everyone knew this was to be where Prince Vik would choose his bride.

During the past month, Vik had only come to call on Claire in her bedroom at the Reines' twice. Vik might have tried to see her more, but Claire was so busy with teaching Isabella—everything from manners to dancing—that she was barely in her room lately. Vik had never left her a note showing that he had been in, nor had he asked about her absence, and Claire grew lonelier by the day.

She missed him so much that tonight, as the clock ticked past ten, Claire left the curtain open just so she could see Vik if he decided to come. *Tomorrow, he will finally choose a bride*, she thought. *And then after that, I'm sure I shall never see him here again.* As Claire sunk deeper into her gloom, a sudden knock on the door roused her.

"Coming," she called.

She went to see who it was and found Isabella standing in the hallway. "Claire," Isabella said, "I have a big favor to ask. Could you come with me to the drawing room?"

"Yes, of course," Claire said, immediately snapping on a smile and nodding. Isabella must have wanted to review her lessons one last time before the big day, Claire thought. She followed the younger girl to the drawing room, but when she opened the door, she found both the baron and baroness sitting on the sofa with somewhat uncomfortable expressions. However, their discomfort wasn't directed at Claire.

What's going on? Claire wondered. She followed their eyes, and there she saw a midnight blue ball gown. *I thought Lady Isabella was to wear a lovely pink dress*, Claire thought. *Why the sudden change?* Nothing about this added up.

Isabella looked straight at Claire, took a deep breath, and said, “Claire, this is the favor. Will you please wear this dress and come with me to the ball tomorrow?”

For a minute, Claire thought this was all some joke, but the dedication in Isabella’s eyes informed her this was serious.

“I told you before,” her father scolded. “You mustn’t bother Claire, Isabella.”

“That’s right,” Marie joined in. “Claire is your governess, and she deserves your respect. What, do you think you can drag her about like a common attendant?”

Normally obedient though she was, Isabella refused to yield. “Please,” she begged. “For the whole last month, I’ve worked really, really hard learning all the right manners and dances. Claire says I’ve made lots of growth too. So would you please let her come with me as a reward for all of my hard work?”

Isabella’s eyes, still clinging to the innocence of childhood but already showing signs of maturity and intelligence, filled with tears. *I knew she was nervous*, Claire thought. She placed a hand on Isabella’s shoulder and bent slightly to be at her eye level.

“Lady Isabella, you are already a marvelous young woman. As your governess, I can say that I would have no shame in presenting you to any manner of polite company.”

“That’s not the point,” Isabella insisted. “That’s not the reason I want you to come with me.” Now the tears spilled over her eyelids and coursed down her cheeks in fat drops. “Claire, you know my room is right above yours. Do you really think I have no idea about what’s been going on?”

Claire gasped, but Isabella continued. “I admire you and the prince so much! So please, won’t you come with me and...?” She did not continue further.

My thoughtless actions have hurt poor, innocent Isabella, Claire chided herself as she patted the sobbing girl on the head.

Once the baron and his wife had put Isabella to bed, they came to visit Claire in her room.

“I apologize for disturbing you so late at night,” the baron said.

“Oh, not at all,” replied Claire. “Really, I must be the one to apologize. I am truly sorry.” She bowed deeply.

“Claire, there’s no need for that, really,” Marie said gently.

“Isabella told us about it earlier,” said John. “After the prince began coming by every day to exchange a few words with you, Isabella longed to act as your lady-in-waiting.”

“Yes indeed,” Marie chimed in. “Isabella said she’s been studying her hardest these past few months to become a lady-in-waiting for our future queen. I certainly thought this was strange, didn’t you? Unless you, Claire, are to be the future queen.”

Both baron and baroness gave one of their usual gentle smiles.

“As the head of this family, I must ask you,” the baron said, “to please chaperone my daughter at the ball tomorrow night.”

“At this rate, the dear girl will never again attain the courage to ask to be your lady-in-waiting. Thus I must also ask you to accompany her.”

Claire smiled apologetically. When even her employers were bowing to her, she had no choice but to accept their request.

The next day, Claire pulled her arms through the sleeves of the dress. It had been months since she had worn anything like this and the snug fit of the corset around her chest brought back memories, some pleasant, some—like the weekly balls she had attended only to chaperone Charlotte—less so.

This was the first ball Claire had attended since her haircut, and her hair now reached down to her shoulders. She braided it into an updo and fixed it with a pin of Isabella’s choosing. The royal blue dress Isabella had ordered for her was elegantly designed, with an illusion neckline covered by dainty lace that extended to her elbows and exposed but little skin. *It looks lovely*, Claire thought as she checked the view of her figure from behind in the full-length mirror.

Then the pocket watch on the desk caught her eye. *No one will notice it with this dress's design*, she thought. *I'm sure it will be fine*. She picked up the watch and fastened it discreetly to her person. Naturally, she understood that, even dressed as she was, she stood no chance of seeing Vik tonight. After all, there was a tacit understanding in both Paffuto and Noston's royal cultures that at such occasions, the prince would pay attention to the young noble ladies in order of their rank. Claire appreciated the Reines' consideration for her, but she fully intended to make herself into a wallflower, as was her wont, and watch Vik dance with the other ladies.

When Claire and Isabella arrived at the ball, they found the hall crowded with ladies, all of whom burst into whispers the moment Claire stepped inside. Concerned for how Isabella might take this, Claire leveled her chin and walked forward demurely. The other girls could not take their eyes off of her, judging that between her fine posture and well-trained mannerisms, here stood a rival in their efforts to win the hand of the prince.

Further inside the hall, Denis, flanked by several of his female acquaintances, stood on guard duty next to Vik. "Say, what do you think all that noise up by the entrance is about?" he remarked.

"Not sure," Keith said. "Let me go see." Yet the minute he turned to look, the sea of murmuring people broke.

For a moment, Vik paused in the middle of regaling the young ladies with his princely smile; he couldn't believe his eyes. The crowd parted, believing an enormously high-ranked lady was in their midst, forming a path which led directly to Vik, in order for the lady to be introduced to him at once—only the lady in question was Claire.

Vik called, "This way, Miss Claire." Claire had thought that if, on the off chance Vik had decided to approach her, it would only be to introduce himself to Isabella. But now here he was, addressing her by name! Her mind panicked for a moment before she restored her usual calm, adopted a modest smile, and stepped up to meet him. She took Vik's hand and swept him a deep curtsy.

"I'm glad you could come," he said. "Please, let me take you to greet His Majesty the King."

Still holding her hand, Vik escorted Claire to the throne where the king sat.

“Your Highness,” Claire whispered. “I’m only—” *here as Isabella’s chaperone*, she meant to say, but the chatter around her was so loud that even Vik, close as he was, could not hear her. *Oh no*, she thought. *How has it come to this?* She fretted over how she could possibly fix this faux pas.

However, Claire’s fears were ungrounded, for after she paid her respects to the king, she was set free once more. Lui came up to the prince and said, “You’d best greet all of these young ladies equally first, or else we’ll have trouble on our hands,” then shooed him into the throng.

With Vik gone, Claire wondered where Isabella was and scanned the ballroom to find her. Isabella had bumped into one of her friends, and when she saw Claire looking for her, gave her governess a cheery wave. Claire sighed with relief and picked up a champagne flute.

She knew all too well that behind the glitz and glamor of events like these lay a frenetic jostling of people attempting to fulfill their own agendas. Particularly, tonight’s ball was a battleground of appearances for all the young ladies who wished to come into power by being chosen as the prince’s bride. Claire wanted no part of this unnecessary drama, so she made to go stand by the wall when a young lady approached her.

“Greetings,” the lady said. “Were you the one the prince brought to pay respects to the king? It’s a pleasure to meet you. My name is Diana Mead.”

There was something peculiar about this self-introduction, Claire thought.

At Diana’s side stood a young man chaperoning her who looked nigh-on identical. “I am Dion Mead, heir to the earldom of Mead,” he said. “My sister and I are twins.”

With her suspicions proven correct, Claire likewise introduced herself. “A pleasure,” she said. “My name is Claire Martino.”

No sooner were the words out of Claire’s mouth than Diana pressed, “Martino? You mean the Martinos from Noston?”

The question was far too direct for introductory chitchat at a ball, and Claire had a bad feeling it signified trouble. She sidestepped answering, with a smile

and a “That’s a good question.”

Diana continued, “Did your mother, by any chance, die young?”

Claire paled and Dion, taking notice, stopped his sister. “My apologies, Miss Claire,” he said, bobbing to her. “That was terribly improper. Do excuse us.”

“Oh no,” said Claire. “Think nothing of it.” The ladylike smile still on her face, she dove into the crowd. As she left, the two exchanged meaningful glances with one another.

The Earl of Mead’s family, Claire ruminated. For some reason, although she couldn’t place why, something about that name made her feel uneasy.

As she puzzled over this, a waltz began in the center of the room. Vik, having finished saying his hellos to the other noble ladies, came up next to her and extended his hand. “May I have this dance, Miss Claire?”

Claire gasped internally. She couldn’t well refuse him—not now that he was in his capacity as the crown prince at a ball such as this, and doubly so because he was her most cherished person in all the world. “I would be delighted,” she said.

Claire had only intended to come to the ball as a lady-in-waiting, but now here she was dancing with the prince himself, matching her rhythm to his along with the waltz’s comfortable tempo. Vik carried himself easily, reminding her once again that he was truly the crown prince. As they twirled across the shining marble floor, she recalled the moment they had first met and felt like she was at risk of once again being drawn into his eyes. Too embarrassed to make eye contact, she kept her gaze downcast for the whole of the dance.

On the edge of her vision, she saw Isabella beaming at her. *I’m sure Isabella must be pleased with this turn of events*, Claire thought. *She’ll remember this ball forever, like as a fairy tale. If only it could have a fairy tale’s ending as well.*

When the song finished, the other guests burst into a hearty round of applause. The highest ranked noble ladies clamored around Vik, crying, “Your Highness, dance with me too!” and, “I’m next, Your Highness!”

I suppose my time here is done, Claire thought. She slipped away from the ballroom and hurried down the long stone corridor leading to the castle

entrance. A brisk breeze blew in from the garden, and the moment the cold, damp air touched her cheeks, the whole emotional lie of the waltz vanished. Cold reality came flooding back in.

As if to find a last, lingering note of that magical dance, Claire felt for the pocket watch at her breast. Then she gasped, "It's gone!" She had kept a careful eye on it ever since the day Vik had lent it to her, but now it was gone.

She immediately scanned her surroundings. The passageway was only faintly lit by lamplight, and Claire could not see the watch in the immediate vicinity. However, she could have sworn she still had it when stepping out of the ballroom a minute ago.

What should I do? she thought. *Without it, I'll never be able to see Vik again.* Reflexively, Claire began to retrace her steps back to the ballroom. She crouched down low to the ground, ignoring her dress dragging in the dirt, and hunted for the watch. Yet no matter how hard she looked, it was nowhere to be found.

Just as she murmured, "It really is gone..." she heard the sound of a swinging chain.

"Looking for this?"

Claire froze in shock. That voice! He wasn't supposed to be here! She spun around, and there stood Vik with the watch dangling from his hand, its coat of arms seal shining in the moonlight.

Immediately, Claire tried to snatch it back, but Vik quickly jerked it out of reach.

"Give it back," she said.

Vik looked startled. It was his watch to begin with, after all.

He had noticed Claire's absence immediately after she had gone and followed her. When he found the watch lying in the passageway, he feared something had happened to her and broke out into a run only to find a girl on her hands and knees the moment he rounded the corner. Once he realized it was Claire, Vik wondered if she was looking for the watch.

Or if not—no, that's too convenient, Vik thought. He didn't have much confidence in his guess, having misunderstood Claire's feelings for a whole month prior.

However, Claire was flat-out desperate for the watch. Noticing Vik falter as he became lost in thought, she reached for the watch again; in response, he nonchalantly lifted it over his head, far too high for Claire to reach. She jumped. He dodged. She scrambled for it. He evaded. Claire and Vik carried on in this manner over and over until they stopped, looked at each other, and burst out laughing.

For all the seriousness of the situation, it took several minutes for their laughter to subside and for Vik to say, "Claire, I don't understand why you want this pocket watch so badly. Would you clue me in?"

Vik's tone of voice sounded so gentle that Claire couldn't help but pout, "I should think it was obvious."

"To tell you the truth," Vik said, "I've been thinking recently about what would make you happiest. I've known that you're the one for me for some time now." He added, "However, I think there's been a grave misunderstanding between us. That's why I'd like to hear what you think in your own words."

Claire still could not meet his eyes. The wind dampening her cheeks did nothing to cool the redness pooling there. She hesitated, and Vik waited patiently for her answer.

Finally, Claire summoned all her courage and opened her mouth. "I do not have the appropriate rank to be with you, Your Majesty. That's why, with the watch, I can at least postpone this farewell a little longer."

And then Claire was instantly enveloped in a deeply familiar, calming scent. For a moment, she didn't understand what had happened, but then she realized Vik was holding her in his arms. Before she could come to terms with this, Vik embraced her all the tighter.

"I'm telling you; you're fine as you are," he affirmed. "Don't worry. I will do everything in my power to resolve what you're so concerned about."

Stunned by the force of emotion in his words, Claire's eyes filled with tears.

Vik turned his head to look at her, and she met his eyes for the first time that day.

“You say that,” Claire insisted, “but you must think of your country. For the sake of Paffuto—for *your* sake, Vik—you really ought to marry a girl with better resources.”

“Do I have to repeat myself? The king already thinks you’re plenty eligible to be my bride!”

Claire’s eyes swam. *I can’t believe it*, she thought.

“Now leave the rest to me. I’ll take care of it,” he promised. “What, do you really think I can’t silence a few conservative ministers if they have anything to say on the subject?”

There he was, she thought. There was that confident man who had stolen her heart.

“Claire, answer me.”

Claire remained silent but, won over by his arguments, nodded.

For a moment, Vik sagged as all the tension left his shoulders. Then he let go of Claire, took a step back, and went down on one knee before her.

“Miss Claire Martino, would you do me the honor of being my future bride?”

And now Claire hesitated no longer. “Yes!” she cried.

Finally holding nothing back, Vik once more swept Claire up into his arms.



Under the moonlight, as their feelings were finally made clear to one another, Claire and Vik shared their first kiss.

Further down the corridor, Lui and Denis stood in a blind spot from where they had watched the entire scene. "I'm kind of surprised you're such a crier," Denis teased.

Ignoring him, Lui looked at the happy couple and whispered, "I'm so glad."

Denis broke out into a genuine grin. He then heard Vik hailing him from nearby. Turning back to face his lord, Denis called out, "Yes, Your Highness?"

"You and I shall head back to the ball now. Lui, see to Claire."

"As you command, Your Highness," Lui and Denis chorused. Vik caressed Claire's head with one lingering, fond gesture and then set off with Denis back to the ballroom.

Lui, left behind with Claire, beamed at her. Claire knew then and there that she would never forget this sweet happiness, this miraculous night, for as long as she lived.

Chapter 3

The Meads stood on the balcony facing the castle garden and whispered to one another.

“What were you thinking talking to her like that, Diana?” Dion chastised. “I swear! You must have made her suspicious. Grandfather will be furious.”

“What are you talking about? He wanted us to find out if the heroine who saved us from the tornado is truly that Martino. I was only doing what he asked me!”

“That’s true, but there are better ways to find out.”

“Whatever,” she said. “I’m more upset that His Royal Highness didn’t choose me. But if he prefers more refined ladies like that Claire girl, then I guess I can’t even compete.”

Preparations were arranged for Claire to spend that night in Lui’s bedchamber.

“You must be awfully tired, what with everything that happened today,” Lui said as she guided Claire to her room. “I’ll inform Lady Isabella for you, so don’t worry about a thing. Just get some rest. Every one of the palace’s guest rooms are already full with visitors coming from all over Paffuto.”

Lui’s room was in a far-back castle corner, and just past it was another door with a guard stationed before it.

“Beyond there are the rooms of the royal family,” Lui explained. “If you were curious, Keith has the room next to me, and Denis’s room is across the way.”

“It must be fun to all live so close together,” Claire said. At first blush, this room placement which centered around the knights’ duties felt a bit overly formal to her, but when she considered her four good friends spending time together, that impression evaporated.

“It is,” Lui agreed. “We frequently meet in Keith’s room to drink with each other. Now, come in and make yourself at home.”

The room, much like its owner, was plainly decorated, with no superfluous frills. Lui showed Claire to the sofa and then crossed to her closet, whereupon she chose several easily wearable outfits for Claire to borrow.

“Thank you, Lui,” Claire said. “Are you sure you don’t have to return to guard duty at the ball?”

Lui began to brew a pot of tea in the kitchenette which came with her room. “Vik will be fine as long as Denis and Keith are there. Besides, I think he’ll feel better if he knows you’re protected. You may already be aware, but there are a number of things afoot at this ball.” She picked up a jar of honey. “You like sweet things, don’t you, Claire?”

Claire giggled. “You’re always so direct, Lui.” Although they’d only known each other for a few short months, Lui already knew Claire well. At first glance, Claire thought, Lui looked cool and unemotional, but she had a truly warm heart once you got to know her. Claire was grateful that she’d continue to have Lui as a part of her life as well.

Then something jogged Claire’s memory. “Speaking of the ball, do you know the Meads, Lui? I spoke to the son and daughter tonight.”

“Yes, I do,” said Lui. “They’re a well-established family in northern Paffuto. If I recall correctly, we invited the earl, his two children, and his father, the earl before him. Why do you ask? Did something happen?”

“I was a bit surprised when one of them asked about my mother and said they knew she died back when I was a child.”

Lui immediately blanched, all her usual composure gone. She slammed her cup down and grabbed Claire’s hand. “Claire!” she cried. “He didn’t touch your hand, did he?”

“No,” Claire said, bewildered. “There wasn’t enough time before I left the two for them to do much besides say that.”

“I see,” Lui sighed, relieved. “Claire,” she continued, “if you go back far enough in history, you will find that the Meads were once a branch family of the

Paffuto royal family. However, they fell from grace due to a large scandal quite a long time ago. More importantly, I want you to be careful, because every generation's eldest son possesses a very particular kind of magic. It mixes together his magical power with his opponent's, so that the opponent cannot use their full strength."

"Is that even possible?" Claire asked.

"It is, if you are the eldest son of the House of Mead."

Just then, there was a knock on Lui's door. She set down her teacup and rose to answer it.

It was Vik and Keith, their duties for tonight's ball now finished. Both sported wet hair, indicating that they must have rushed to bathe and change before hurrying over here. "I was hoping we could all talk as a group about our next steps," Vik said.

"Where is Denis?" Claire asked.

Vik smirked. "Out partying."

"Never mind him," said Lui as she ushered the other two inside. "Come in and sit down. Claire was telling me about something very concerning."

Claire started over from the beginning, and once she was done, Vik muttered, "The Meads, huh?"

Keith and Lui wore matching serious expressions, as if they had already guessed the implications. Vik remained silent for a moment and then asked, "Claire, can you create wards of divine protection?"

"More or less," she said. "But nothing as perfect as Lui's wards. I'd say they're only about sixty percent as strong as hers."

Wards of divine protection fell under the category of simple magic, but their accuracy varied widely depending on the spellcaster's experience and sheer magical ability. Naturally, Claire was lacking in the former department.

"The Meads were once a royal branch family," Vik explained. "However, over a hundred years ago, Duke Mead fell to the rank of an earl when he planned

treason against the royal family. When Lindel was destroyed, we conducted a secret investigation to determine who helped the marquis's family, but for some reason, the Meads were the one family who were never searched. Even the royal family is suspicious of them, which shows how powerful they are."

A horrible, ice-cold feeling ran down Claire's spine.

Lui nodded in agreement and added, "The Mead family possesses an ability called Collective Magic, which is a true threat. As long as the difference in power levels isn't too large, the Meads can disrupt their opponents' ability to perform magic. That is why we place wards on ourselves whenever we have contact with their eldest son. If the ward ever breaks, we must put it back up."

"If these were normal times, we wouldn't have anything to worry about, but they appear to know that you purified the tornado. It also concerns me that they chose to approach you now, of all times... Just to be on the safe side, I think we need to make a plan." Vik turned serious eyes on Claire. "Claire," he said.

"Yes?"

"You are now formally my choice of queen consort. Until we are married, you will have your own room in a separate part of the palace and receive special training." Vik's expression was every inch the prince; it startled Claire and made her think of their earlier conversation.

He continued, "I want you to live here and to learn everything that you can about protecting yourself from magic."

"Not a bad idea," said Keith. "It's for Claire's own good. How about a guard for her too?"

"I think for now she'll be safe so long as she stays in the palace. If worse comes to worst, we can have her teleport away."

Getting a full picture of the direness of the situation, Claire nodded and said, "Very well."

Keith had been carefully scrutinizing the earlier exchange and now scratched the back of his head sheepishly. "Man. How do I say this? For a couple of people who just admitted their love for each other, it really doesn't feel like

everything's sunshine and roses, huh?"

Lui glared at him. "I've told you before. There's no need for your pointless worrying."

Claire and Vik caught each other's eyes and grinned.

"And thus ends my report," Dion intoned.

Four people had gathered together for discussion in a palace room designated to house the Meads.

Dion and Diana's grandfather, the former Earl Mead, adopted a grim look. "So our suspicions were correct. The girl really is the daughter of Duke Martino. That bodes ill for us."

"Additionally," the current Earl spoke up, "we can assume that the girl knows of her mother's background due to where she received her baptism. Naturally, there is no reason to suspect she knows of our involvement. However, my lord father, I fear this last descendant of the Lindel royal family has become a much different sort of obstacle than any of her ancestors. Consider this: how did she manage to slip into Paffuto under our noses and strike up such an intimate relationship with the royal family?"

"That magical power of hers was enough to instantaneously purify the largest magical tornado the world has ever seen. Miss Claire will become a powerful shield protecting the family who currently sits on the throne of Paffuto. As long as she lives, we cannot retake our rightful place."

"What if I were to use my magic?" suggested Dion. "If I were to combine her power with mine—"

"You little fool!" snapped his grandfather. "Your power is a double-edged sword. Until we know what color of magic she has, you cannot use it lightly, lest her power overwhelm you."

Dion wilted under his grandfather's stern glare. "My apologies," he said.

Next to him, Diana sat repainting her nails. As if to make a spectacle of her utter ennui, she plunked the bottle of polish down on the table before

meticulously blowing each fingertip dry. “Grandfather,” she said, “then why don’t you wait for me to befriend her? I could also use one of her current friends to lay a trap for her.”

“That is just as foolish,” Earl Mead chastised. “If we send anyone in, it will be Dion.”

The grandfather nodded solemnly. “Yes. Dion is preferable.”

A week later, Claire set off for the palace. However, she was not coming to visit a friend on her day off. Rather, here was to be her new home from this day forth. She had wanted to stay on as the Reines’ governess, but some sacrifices had to be made for the sake of her safety. Besides, in light of the Meads’ potential plot, she didn’t want to bring any trouble down on the Reines.

Claire had stayed up late last night taking tea and talking with the Reines, so she felt a bit tired today. *Yet I enjoyed myself last night*, she reminded herself.

Keith and Denis came to pick her up, and Claire bowed her head to them both. “Thank you for coming to escort me, gentlemen,” she said.

“Hey, Claire!” said Denis. “I’m having a party tonight, and you should totally come. I’ll introduce you to a ton of cute girls who you can be friends with!”

Ignoring Denis, Keith frowned apologetically and said, “Sorry your room ended up so far from ours, Claire.”

The room given to Claire was in the eastern wing of the palace, far from where Vik and the others lived. Vik had declared that there would be a room for his future bride in the palace, but in reality, it was unheard of for anyone but a high-ranking noble lady to be chosen as a prince’s fiancée. This meant that giving a room within the palace to the future queen consort was highly irregular. The conservatives in the ministry gave considerable opposition, but the decision ultimately went through when the king voiced his approval, asking where the harm was in letting the heroine who had saved the country sojourn in the palace for a time. Vik had hoped to give her a room near Lui’s, but due to these factors, he was unsuccessful.

However, Claire didn’t mind a whit. “No need to apologize,” she said. “I’m

simply glad to receive such a large, lovely room. It gets so much sunlight too. Thank you for taking all the trouble.”

Denis grinned and threw her a wink. “Plus, now that you’re within the palace, Vik no longer has to climb a wall to see you.”

Claire shook her head and placidly responded, “In order to preserve our good prince’s reputation, Keith, I ask that you keep a close watch to prevent him from coming to visit me whenever he pleases.”

“You make a good point,” he said. “I’ll do my best.”

Keith looked more worn out than usual, and Claire bet that she could guess what was running him ragged. “Are Vik and Lui working right now?” she asked.

“Correct. Worrying things are afoot, so they’re off to the Academy.”

Claire felt perplexed. “Why the Academy?” she asked. Wasn’t there no school today? However, over the course of her next day at school, the answer soon became clear to her.

When Claire opened her eyes the next morning, she discovered a maid in her bedroom.

“Good morning, Lady Claire,” said the maid. “I’ve prepared some tea and refreshments to help you wake. Afterwards, may I bring you breakfast?”

For a bizarre moment, Claire thought she was back in her father’s house. Then she remembered. *Oh yes. I moved into the palace yesterday.*

“Yes, thank you,” she said. “I should like something light, please. And I will not need assistance dressing myself today.”

Since Claire had spent so much time living in her father’s mansion, even the extended time away did not make her feel uncomfortable when dealing with servants.

The maid paused for a long moment and then said, “Very well, my lady.” Even though she did not voice it, her body language screamed, *This woman is the prince’s fiancée, but she isn’t even a real lady!* Claire, used to this reaction by now, wasn’t bothered by it.

The maid prepared Claire's meal in the adjoining room and soon returned bearing a tray with a light breakfast—fresh fruit and a croissant—and a folded note.

"What is this?" Claire asked, indicating the note.

"It was wedged into the doorframe, my lady. The paper bears the prince's coat of arms, so His Majesty must have left you a message late last night." The maid bobbed in a slight bow and withdrew.

"Thank you," Claire called to her.

She now unfolded the small note and read, "I would like it if you could place a ward on yourself before you go to school tomorrow. I will explain the reason why later."

Her stomach flip-flopped.

"My name is Dion Mead. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

Her bad feeling proved correct.

When Claire arrived at school, she found that Dion had transferred in, despite it being the middle of term. *This must have been the worrying thing Keith mentioned*, she thought. Tingling with nerves, she looked in Vik's direction. He caught her eye and nodded.

Before lunch, Vik called Lydia and Claire to an unused lecture room. "Sorry to give you the news this late," he said, "but we received a very sudden request yesterday to have the Meads transfer to our school. You're not the only one, Claire, who's concerned about the boy's special magical ability. Many other noble families are too. We talked until late last night, trying to stop this, but it was very challenging, considering nothing's actually happened yet." He paused. "I'm worried now."

Claire shook her head. "Don't be concerned, Vik. I will be fine."

"It's too hard to pull it off today as she has other duties, but I've changed the schedule so that starting tomorrow Lui can act as your guard."

Vik had up until this point spoken quietly, but then he suddenly heard a

footstep. He cried, “Who’s there?” and his retainers rushed out of the room to scan the hallway outside.

When they returned, one of the retainers said, “There’s no one out there.”

“I see. I’m sure that can’t be right.” Vik’s expression turned stern. “Lydia, I wish I could stay with her, but I’m asking that you take care of Claire today in my stead.”

“Of course, Your Highness. Rest assured that she is safe with me.”

She beamed at him as her palm began to glow.



Meanwhile, Keith and Denis were wrapping up paperwork in Vik’s office.

Keith looked miserable as he muttered, “The Meads’ magic is almost like a curse. Everyone should be on their guard about it. Do you think Claire, as powerful as she is, has a need for concern too?”

Bored, Denis slumped in his seat as he worked and said, “Nah.” Despite the lack of interest in his voice, his hands moved rapidly, filing paperwork at a blistering pace. “Dion’s the one who needs to watch out. She’s stronger than he can handle, and if something bad happens, Claire’s not going to be the one who’ll suffer for it.”



That afternoon, Claire finished her lunch and set off for the lecture room where she took her private magic lessons—only to find Dion waiting for her in the corridor.

“Miss Claire Martino, was it?” he asked. “Do you remember me? We met the other night at the ball.”

Claire tensed up, immediately on her guard. “Yes,” she said. “But if you’ll excuse me, I’m in a hurry to get to my lecture.”

She channeled all of her magic to the surface of her body so that if Dion broke her ward, she could replace it immediately after. *I will be all right*, she reminded herself. *I only need to do what Lui and I practiced earlier.*

Just then, Lydia, whom Claire had been with only moments before in the lunchroom, strode up. “May I ask what is going on here?” She must have been watching without Claire noticing. “You are in the presence of Lady Claire, His Royal Highness’s fiancée. Have you forgotten, sir, how improper it is for a man to approach this good lady when unaccompanied by the prince?”

Dion, surprised by Lydia’s sudden appearance, raised both of his hands in an odd gesture before immediately retracting them. “You are...Miss Lydia Carrere, I presume? I don’t have any particular intentions, miss. I only spoke to her because we’ve met before.” Then he smiled at Claire again and stepped away.

“That was fast, Lady Claire,” said Lydia.

“Indeed. Thank you for coming to my rescue. It is very reassuring to know you are there for me.” She clasped Lydia’s hand.

“Let me escort you to your classroom,” Lydia said, and she walked with Claire to the lecture hall used for Claire’s afternoon classes.

“Lady Lydia,” Claire asked as they made their way through the halls, “would I know immediately if someone shared their magic power with me?”

“It would feel like a foreign substance had entered the flow of magic within you, I suppose. Of course, I am not speaking from personal experience, but I would imagine you would notice it at once.”

The two arrived at the lecture hall. Once Claire opened the door, she would find her tutor waiting for her on the other side. She would be safe.

“I’ll see you later,” Lydia said.

“Thank you, Lady Lydia.”

Glad to know that Claire would be all right now, Lydia smiled and walked away. Claire watched her friend go. Then, just as Claire put her hand on the door, a voice whispered in her ear.

“My apologies for doing this just after we’ve met one another. I’d have liked to spend more time learning about you, but I hear that Lady Lui will be guarding you starting tomorrow.”

Then someone grabbed her hand. With a snap, a powerful shock wave, like a

huge burst of static electricity, ran up her body. She realized then that Dion had appeared out of nowhere and was now gripping her hand. His eyes glowed red, and Claire could tell from a single look that powerful magic was about to burst forth from him at any moment.

My ward has broken! she thought. Yet, before she could react, Dion summoned the power to his hand to strike once more.

Oh no, she thought. *I won't be able to make it in time!* Just as she feared for the worst, a flash of light burst from her own hand and blanketed the whole area in white, forcing her to slam her eyes shut. At the same time, a powerful force slammed into Dion and jolted through his body.

Claire braced herself, but nothing happened. She gingerly opened her eyes, whereupon she saw, to her considerable surprise, Dion lying slumped over, having slammed into the wall.

"Huh?" she said, trying to grasp the situation.

Claire's tutor, alerted to the commotion by the shock wave, burst out of the lecture hall. "What just happened?" he cried.

"Professor, um..." Claire attempted to explain.

"Are you all right, Miss Claire?" He paused before adding, "Hmm? Isn't this a curse?"

Dion lay out cold on the floor and showed no signs of coming around.

Vik and Lydia, having heard the news, rushed into the lecture hall. "Are you all right, Claire?" Vik cried.

"Yes, *I'm* fine," she answered apologetically. Next to her was a cot on which Dion lay, still unconscious.

"I saw a magical power come from Miss Claire's hand when he touched her. She must have reflected his curse," the lecturer, Cheinz, explained.

Surprised, Vik leveled a steely glare, but Lydia giggled freely in response.

"I wonder if that's what Lui meant when she said putting up a ward would protect Claire from Dion," Vik murmured, lost in thought.

Cheinz went on to explain, “The Mead family’s Collective Magic is a very dangerous spell. In situations such as these where the opponent’s magic is much stronger than the user’s, not only will the user be unable to control the opponent, but they also run the risk of having the magic backfire and hurt them, as is the case here. This young man will wake later, but his magical powers will be linked with Miss Claire for life.”

“No!” Claire gasped. *Talk about paying for his mistakes*, she thought. *This boy’s future is ruined!*

“It’s a shame,” said Vik, “but you don’t need to feel responsible in any way.”

“That’s right. It’s not your fault that Dion is as foolish as he looks,” Lydia chimed in.

“This does run the risk of becoming a national issue,” Vik said. Despite his serious tone of voice, he almost looked happy. “Attacking my fiancée with a curse is tantamount to attacking my royal family. Still, I’m sure the opposition will find a way to twist this and pin the blame on you. But regardless of what happens, since the situation has reached a head now, the Meads will no longer be able to keep their special privilege of claiming exemption from the Lindel investigation.”

The same magic that Claire had used to wholly purify the tornado had now laid Dion out unconscious. Claire decided to let the Academy handle the aftermath and rode back to the palace after class in a carriage. She put away her school things and changed out of her uniform as quickly as she could before rushing over to Vik’s office.

“I apologize for interrupting,” she said as she came in, only to find Keith, Denis, Lui, and a noticeable lack of Vik, even though he had left school before her. “Wait, is Vik not back yet?”

“Hey, Claire.” Keith grinned. “Vik’s meeting with the king to fill him in on all the events of today.”

“Hello, Claire,” said Lui. She looked worried. “Are you all right?”

“I am, but...Lord Dion isn’t...and I feel so confused.” Claire’s shoulders

slumped. This entire affair had undeniably been his fault, but he was probably only acting on the earl's orders. Considering that, she couldn't help but pity him in his current, unfortunate state. More than anything else, she felt considerably shocked, as this was the first time she had ever seen magic render anyone unconscious.

"You have to wonder why he'd use that spell without knowing for a fact how strong Claire was," Denis mused. "I always got the feeling that there was something kind of off about his sister, Diana, so I guess the apple doesn't fall far from the tree." Denis, ever the social butterfly, talked as if he knew Diana well.

Just then, Vik dashed back in, panting heavily and interrupting their conversation. "There's been a change of plans," he said.

"What is it?" Keith urged.

"The king is now supervising the Mead case directly. Considering how grave this situation is, he ordered me to take direct action, not act on my feelings." Vik sounded a little rueful.

A few months had passed since it was brought to light that Claire's mother was the lost princess of Lindel, and Vik had investigated the matter on his own whenever he found the time. Now here he was, finally finding the first clue that would lead him closer to the truth, but it frustrated him that he could do nothing about it.

"However, the king has sworn to resolve this conflict to ensure Claire's safety. It will take some time, so please be patient."

"Of course. Thank you, Vik." Claire beamed at him.

"And, uh..." Vik looked at her for a few moments, then turned bright red, and swung about to face the others.

"And in other news, it has been decided that we will be taking an extended trip to Noston next month."

Claire gasped involuntarily, surprised to hear the name of her homeland.

Now, Vik addressed her directly, saying, "Noston is an important neighbor of ours. If I take you for a wife without consulting them, given that you are the

daughter of a Nostonian duke and the former fiancée of their crown prince, it could very likely cause friction between us.”

“And here I thought you had something important to say,” Denis teased. “Is this the real reason you came running in here like your tail was on fire?”

Keith ignored him. “That’s been worrying me too, Vik.”

Shyly, Claire spoke up. “I don’t think anyone back home cares that I left, really.” From her perspective, people in Noston esteemed her about as highly as a dirty dishrag. To her family and homeland, she had not only failed to live up to their expectations, but had also tormented her younger sister and fled the country before she could be held accountable for her crimes.

“That’s not true!” Denis yelled. It was rare to hear him this worked up. “Admittedly,” he added at his regular register, “the only reason we ever got to meet someone as cute as you is because those Noston folks didn’t have the eyes to see the gem right under their noses.”

“That’s right,” Vik said with a nod. “Thinking about how everyone treated you makes me seethe, but that’s the one thing I feel grateful to them for.”

He continued, “The other purpose of my visit next month is to invite them to my coronation next spring. We still need to finalize the arrangements, but I’m currently planning to stay there for three weeks. If I get the chance, the king has commanded me to announce that I’m marrying Claire and pay my respects to the Martinos. He also told me to bring them a generous bride-dowry in honor of the engagement.”

“That sounds...fun, somehow,” Lui said. “I’m looking forward to this!” She tried to suppress a meaningful giggle.

“But in that case,” said Keith, “shouldn’t we bring Claire along? We were hiding that she was a Martino in order to keep her safe from any potential pursuers from Noston, right? Now seems like a good time to show them that the country of Paffuto is on her side.” Even knowing Claire’s complex feelings about Noston, Keith was ever pragmatic.

“I’m against anything that’ll be likely to hurt Claire,” Vik said. “So I won’t be having her along.”

“You’re such an old man, Keith,” said Denis. “Lighten up.”

Vik and Denis were rejecting Keith on the basis of Claire’s feelings, but Claire knew full well that this was neither the time nor place to placate her own selfish desires. *This isn’t right*, she thought. *Keith is correct. Now that I’m engaged to Vik, how can I keep running away?*

As if reading Claire’s mind, Lui asked gently, “Claire, what would you like to do?”

Claire started. She took a brief pause before answering with, “I would like to come with you all to Noston. However...” She tilted her head. “Vik, am I right in assuming the king actually told you to take me along?”

Vik looked momentarily pained. “You figured me out, huh?” he said. “I can’t get anything past you.”

Claire smiled at him demurely. “It turns out that I know a thing or two about marrying into royal families, Your Highness! It disappoints me that, through your attempts to be considerate of my feelings, your judgment has grown clouded.”

Denis whistled in admiration.

“And,” Claire continued, the smile spreading across her face, “I must say that I would love to take another trip with you all again.”

Two weeks later, on the day after the Academy let out for break, Claire, Vik, and all the rest gathered to set out for Noston.

Claire leaned out the coach window to see the full length of the convoy. “How incredible,” she said. “I had no idea so many people would be accompanying us on our visit.”

“Uh-huh,” said Vik. “Our trip half a year ago was for personal reasons, but this is an official visit to deliver a message from the king. You might find it a bit too stuffy for your tastes, but try to hang in there for my sake, okay?”

“Oh, it’s not stuffy at all. I do regret that I can’t share a horse with Lui again, but either way, I am looking forward to this trip!”

Lui poked her head in through the window and grinned at the sight of Claire and Vik laughing together as they sat opposite one another. “We’re about to set off,” she informed them.

Then, with Keith on horseback ahead of the coach and Lui and Denis riding alongside its flanks, the party set off.

Meanwhile, Noston’s preparations to receive its more powerful neighbor’s crown prince proceeded at a brisk pace.

Charlotte tiptoed into Prince Asbert’s office and, covering her mouth with her hands, giggled, “Your Highness, would you like to have tea with me this afternoon?” A basket containing a tea set and several baked goods dangled from one arm.

“I apologize, but I cannot spare the time. I am in the midst of preparing for a visit from an extremely important guest. Would you like me to have Salomon take tea with you instead?” Asbert replied as kindly as he could.

Charlotte pursed her little pink lips and pouted. “Not again!”

Asbert noticed her expression but pretended not to. Salomon, sensing the murderous rage Charlotte was directing at Asbert, tactfully led her to the door with a “Let us be on our way, Miss Charlotte.”

Her eyes welled with tears, and she cried out, “Your Highness!” one more time in Asbert’s direction. When this appeal also failed to move him, she brushed away Salomon’s hand and said, “No thank you, I’m fine. Please excuse me.” She dashed out of the room, slamming the door behind her.

Asbert sighed the moment she was gone.

Salomon looked at him with an unreadable expression. “Miss Charlotte has come by every day since the Academy went on break, hasn’t she?”

“How I wish she’d give *me* a break, considering everything I have on my plate right now. I understand that due to her circumstances she sometimes has these flights of fancy, but I always thought she was much more sensible at heart.” Asbert put his head in his hands.

Salomon looked surprised. “Miss Charlotte? Why, but that isn’t her character at all. Your Highness, I’m afraid you’re confusing her with someone else entirely.”

Ugh! I can’t believe him! Charlotte harrumphed, peeved that Asbert had turned down her tea invitation for the third day running. Forgetting to playact the part of the demure lady for once, she stomped down the corridor before it occurred to her that she might have been followed by Asbert or, perhaps, even Salomon. She spun around, but the corridor behind her was empty.

“No one’s even coming after me to see if I’m okay!” Charlotte screeched. Trembling with rage, she fled the palace and raced home. As the school was on break, she was presently not staying in the Academy dorms, but rather at the Martino mansion in Tillard.

A maid came to meet her at the foyer and said, “Welcome home, Lady Charlotte.”

Charlotte didn’t so much as acknowledge the maid’s presence with a hello, but instead pushed the basket at her. “Here, take it. I made too much food by mistake.”

It took the startled maid a moment to recover enough to say, “Yes, my lady.”

Charlotte hadn’t planned for her demeanor to change in Claire’s absence, preferring to play up the part of the ever bubbly, innocent, and lovable young lady. However, her words and behavior these past few months had betrayed some of her true personality, leading to her reputation tanking among the maids and servants.

Charlotte brushed past the maid and began to run up the spiral staircase to her room when Benjamin, hearing that his daughter was home, poked his head in from the lounge. “Charlotte, were you able to see the prince today?” he asked.

“Father! I didn’t know you were home!” Charlotte cried. She stopped in her tracks and snapped on an innocent grin. “Yes, and I had the most wonderful time with him. It went by so fast.”

“The whole palace is very busy right now, so see to it that you don’t take up too much of his time,” Benjamin cautioned. “I’m glad you’re home early, however, as we are having a guest tonight. See to it that you are formally dressed when you come down to dinner.”

“Yes, father. And may I know who this guest may be?” *Formal dress*, she thought with piqued interest. *Perhaps that means it’s another handsome son of one of father’s men, or maybe a knight captain. Maybe he’ll be just the thing to spice up this break from school!*

However, Charlotte’s hopes were dashed when her father said, “Your Aunt Anne.”

“Aunt Anne?” she repeated. Her face fell.

Anne was Benjamin’s younger sister and had embodied the pride of the Martino family before Charlotte came along and took Claire’s destined spot. She possessed white magic much like Charlotte and lived as an unmarried holy woman in the royal church. Anne had doted on all of the Martino children from the day they were born, but it had been clear to everyone that Claire was her favorite.

This would be Charlotte’s first time seeing Anne since Claire’s disappearance. *I bet she’s just going to look at me and sneer*, she thought. *All right. I’ll stay to dinner just for the toast and then return to my room claiming to feel sick.* With her plan in place, Charlotte retired to her bedroom.

Anne arrived when night fell with a bottle of champagne in tow.

“It has been far too long since I last had the opportunity to see all of you,” she said. “What a shame that Claire could not be with us as well.”

Anne poured a toast of champagne in Claire’s honor and then sat down at the dinner table with sorrow written over her face. The bubbles in Charlotte’s glass, finer than she’d ever seen, sparkled at her with a curious shimmer.

With a concerned look in Charlotte’s direction, Benjamin rebuked his sister. “Don’t mention Claire, Anne.”

Charlotte’s shoulders slumped, and she adopted a sad frown on her face. “I miss her,” she whispered. “I just wish I could see her again.”

“Do you really?” Anne asked, far too loudly.

Ugh, Charlotte thought. *This is exactly why I can't stand you!* She hung her head to hide her rising impatience and, with a bit of effort, coaxed tears from her eyes. “Of course, Aunt Anne,” she sobbed. “Claire’s my sister, after all.”

Her father and brothers were moved by this display of sorrow, but Anne only asked, “Did everyone hear about the tornado in Wurtz?”

“Yes, of course,” answered Benjamin.

“It would have been the largest magical tornado in history. If it had fully formed, our only recourse would have been to erect a shield over the entire kingdom, as presently the most powerful magic Noston has at its disposal is white.”

Anne looked at Charlotte as she continued. “However, someone in Paffuto purified this tornado. Perfectly, I might add. There is only one person in the whole world who could possibly do that.”

Benjamin picked up on what Anne was implying. “Do you mean to tell me that Claire saved the world? Preposterous. Her magic never ranked above light pink; such a feat would have been impossible for her.”

At that moment, the younger of Charlotte’s two brothers, Leo, dropped his champagne glass which then exploded with a crash. His face turned white.

“People only see what they want to see,” Anne insisted. “Every member of this family is a fool for giving up on looking for Claire the minute she ran away.” She rose from her seat. “I will intrude on you no longer. Enjoy the champagne without me. Benjamin, you and I will meet next week at the ceremony to welcome the prince.”

Anne swept out, leaving only a heavy silence in the dining room behind her.

Oscar sipped from his glass and then, curiously, said, “She does raise a good point. Father, why did you send out only the one search party after Claire vanished?”

“As if you objected,” Benjamin grumbled. “No, I believe you said that so long as Asbert had Charlotte, Claire only stood in the way of their happiness.”

“I can’t believe I would say that...but I suppose I did,” Oscar mumbled.
“Oddly, whenever I try to think about this important thing, my head begins to feel all foggy.”

Oh no, Charlotte thought. Sensing imminent danger, she slapped the biggest smile possible onto her face and steered the conversation in a different direction. “Father, is there something happening at the palace next week? Aunt Anne mentioned a welcoming ceremony for a prince. Which prince is this?”

“Did His Highness not tell you? The Crown Prince of Paffuto, His Highness Prince Vik, will be here in Noston on official business next week.”

“Oh!” Charlotte cried. “Is that the one everyone says is great at his job and is super cute to boot?” She leapt to her feet in her excitement.

The other members of her family gave her a disconcerted look. “Charlotte, it is improper to make comments like that,” Oscar chided.

“My apologies.” She affected a discouraged look, but Oscar did not react. *For the whole past six months, he’s been doing nothing but paying me compliment after compliment.* It came as a huge surprise to hear him directing a harsh opinion towards her now.

Wait! she thought. *Aunt Anne! Did she do something to us when I wasn’t looking?* Charlotte sensed that the wind had begun to blow ever so slightly in a different direction since the arrival of her aunt.

That night, when she returned to her bedroom, Charlotte thought, *Asbert’s not bad, but he’s not at all the considerate type. I don’t feel like he even cares for me—not like he used to. I’d take a prince of a huge country like Paffuto over Asbert any day! Everyone says he’s incredible, and if he gets his work done quickly, that leaves me with plenty of time to show him off to all my friends!*

“That settles it,” she declared. “I’m going to ask father to let me meet the prince, and then I’ll make him mine!”

Charlotte, ever anxious to rise up higher in society, gleefully cackled without truly understanding where she stood.

Six days after leaving Paffuto, Claire’s party arrived at the Iias way station.

“If we’re here, that means Tillard is about a two hour journey away,” Lui told Claire as the two girls took a break in a café. Vik was currently in the coach with the other knights, planning for their arrival in Tillard, but he had allowed Claire a chance to take Lui and stretch her legs after far too much time spent holed up in the coach.

“We met here half a year ago, didn’t we?” Claire said. Lui met her eyes and smiled warmly.

Just then, Claire was hit with the realization that in the midst of the calm, moderated aura Lui always cloaked herself with, there was also a bit of nervousness. She knew she’d often sensed that before when Lui was on duty, but it was definitely more pronounced today. *Well, it makes sense*, Claire reasoned. *One should be more on guard when traveling in a different country.*

Still, she thought it was odd and decided to pose the question to Lui. “You seem rather tense. Is everything all right?”

Lui snickered softly. “You noticed? I’m sorry. Am I scaring you?”

Claire rapidly shook her head no. “Not at all. I’m not sure how to phrase this, but it makes you look...well, even more handsome, I suppose, than you normally are.”

Lui grinned bashfully. “I’ll need to put a ward up on Vik when we arrive at the palace. That’s just proper protocol for diplomatic missions, you see. Noston is our ally, so we have nothing to worry about, but it is my duty to protect him in this rather unorthodox state of affairs. That’s what has been weighing on my mind.”

“I’m sorry,” said Claire. “That was insensitive of me to ask.” She recognized now, more than ever, what a responsibility these royal knights had.

“I’m sorry too,” Lui said, “for suggesting that we should be on our guard in your homeland.”

“It makes sense, given your duties. I’ll gladly help you if worse comes to worst. Although, I’m afraid I don’t have much to offer.” She shrugged and grinned self-consciously.

“Thank you. That makes me feel better.”

The two giggled together until it was time for Claire to return to the coach and hear what Vik and the others had come up with.

“We’ll arrive around nightfall,” Vik explained. “The first thing we’ll do is send a letter to the king. Tomorrow, there will be an official welcoming ceremony, followed by a ball in the evening.”

These were the same plans that Claire had heard before; nothing had changed. She nodded.

“Claire,” Vik continued, “I’d like you to attend the ball with me as my fiancée. Are you prepared to do that?”

“Yes.”

“During the tea party after the welcoming ceremony, I intend to speak to the king about the matter of our upcoming marriage. Things may be awkward or uncomfortable for you until then, but I ask that you bear with it for me.”

“Of course, Your Highness.” Vik was always looking out for her.

As their arrival in Tillard approached, Claire felt herself growing more and more on edge.

Two hours later, the coach pulled up to the castle right on schedule. Because the reception of the townsfolk was so tremendous, Keith occupied the conspicuous spot across from Vik. Claire, meanwhile, rode in a coach with the maidservants. She sneaked a look out the coach window, away from the cheering crowd, and marveled at the familiar sight of the town she had once lived in.

Mere minutes after they’d arrived, Vik and the others set off to dispatch the letter to the king. Yet who should they find waiting to greet them in front of the palace but Crown Prince Asbert himself.

Claire gasped internally and without thinking hid behind the maidservants. Although she knew Asbert would be unlikely to recognize her with her short hair and Paffish clothing, she ducked her head to hide her face anyway.

“I’m off,” Vik said. “I’ll be back later.”

“Take care, Your Highness,” said Claire. She watched him leave with the knights.

Then she and the maids set off for the rooms to which the Paffish delegation had been assigned. As they entered, Claire looked around at the familiar rooms and gardens of this castle, guarded by its white walls. The scents of flowers that didn’t grow in Paffuto’s royal gardens filled Claire with a sense of nostalgia. *I’ve only been away for a short time*, she thought, *but it feels like it was so long ago since I’ve been here*. As the prince’s fiancée, she had come to the palace many times since she was a child. Her visits had slacked off dramatically following her fateful baptism at fifteen. But up until then, due to an arrangement between the king and her father, the castle had practically been a playground for young Claire.

Suddenly, she recalled what Vik had said to her in the coach. *Things may be awkward or uncomfortable for you until then, but I ask that you bear with it for me*.

He must have meant that I should avoid being noticed until after the tea party tomorrow, Claire thought. She pulled off the scarf covering her shoulders and instead used it to cover her head.

Just then, she cried a little “Oh!” of realization. While she’d been wandering down memory lane, Claire had also managed to wander off from the maids. She checked behind her and up ahead around the next corner, but no one was there.

Oh no, she thought. *I can’t afford to get so wrapped up in the past that I let my guard down*. Even in this old, familiar place that Claire knew like the back of her hand, she didn’t know to which room she and the others had been assigned; to make matters worse, she now stood in the suite of offices that only the cabinet ministers and royal family were privy to entering.

First things first, I need to go somewhere with fewer people, she thought.

Yet just as she turned to go, a familiar, chilling voice asked, “What are you doing here?” Something hard and sharp—a sword!—ripped the scarf off her head.

Claire gulped. Before she could even react, the young man with the sword,

now even more shocked than she was, cried, “Miss Claire!” He was Salomon, Asbert’s retainer.

Claire had not come into this situation entirely unprepared and thus forced herself to sound calm as she answered, “How wonderful to see you again, my lord Salomon. I arrived today as part of the delegation from Paffuto, so I would truly appreciate it if you would quit acting as though I don’t belong here.” She pulled out the watch to show him the royal crest on it and beamed at him winsomely.

“The royal crest of Paffuto!” Salomon cried. “My apologies, my lady. I had heard that you’d gone missing. I was sure you were d—I mean, I am...glad to hear that you have been well.”

Salomon’s eyes, always hard to read, wavered. Over these past few months, what with everything from the Meads targeting her to the magical tornado incident, Claire had not noticed any sign of a search party from Noston. It relieved her to think that everyone probably assumed she had gone off and died somewhere off the edge of the map—which, she supposed, didn’t entirely miss the mark. No wonder Salomon looked like he’d seen a ghost.

Rather than be angry about this, Claire found it amusing and giggled. “Likewise,” she said. Claire knew Salomon, Asbert’s right-hand man, well. He was a bright individual who, in spite of his intellect, served Asbert with a simple honesty. Even after Claire’s ostracism at the Academy had begun, Salomon had seemed judgmental of Asbert’s decision-making. Come to think of it, even when the rest of Asbert’s entourage had pretended she didn’t exist, Salomon’s treatment of her remained relatively the same right up until the end. *I’m glad that he was the one to find me, of all people*, she reflected.

“I was so wrapped up in old memories that I lost sight of my companions,” she explained. “Would you be so kind as to point me to the right wing, at least?”

“I’ll gladly take you there myself,” Salomon answered, his manner suddenly far more polite since recognizing their guest of honor’s crest on the pocket watch. “Follow me, please.”

While Salomon’s presence did bring back pleasant memories, he and Claire

were not close enough to feel the need to catch up with one another, so they made the trip back to the guest quarters in silence.

However, when they were part of the way there, Claire spoke up. "I was deeply moved by the warm welcome the townsfolk gave us earlier. His Highness Prince Vik was likely also moved by this fine display of Noston's character and no doubt wishes to deepen the relationship between our two countries."

Salomon's eyes grew wide.

"Knowing you, my lord Salomon," Claire continued, "I'm sure you understand exactly what I am implying. I mean no malice when I say that His Highness Prince Asbert and Charlotte are a perfect couple. I'm well aware that he views having an object of his affection like Charlotte as a prized treasure for Noston's future. As someone living in a neighboring country on good terms with Noston, my only wish is for our respective kingdoms to continue to coexist in harmony forevermore."

At first, Salomon made no response and let the silence continue save for the *trap-trap* of their footsteps. Finally, he confided, "As His Highness's retainer, I can't help but believe he has made a grave error, the likes of which cannot be undone."

Claire interpreted this as an idle comment, but Salomon's face was serious. "Miss Claire..." he began. "Might I ask about your hair?"

He'd probably assumed she had entered the church as a holy woman, Claire supposed, and wanted to ask what she was doing here now. She thought back to the night when she cut her own hair and escaped her dormitory, the night she had learned that all of the pride supporting her in life was no more than a mass of falsehoods.

She straightened her posture and answered like a lady. "A gentleman does not ask such foolish questions."

Salomon bowed deeply. "My apologies." He hesitated to straighten up, seemingly lost in thought. To Claire, his long bow felt like a serious apology.

"This is the wing given over to the delegation from Paffuto for use, is it not?" Claire said. "Thank you for showing me the way."

Then, she passed through the door, slamming it shut, and never bothered to look back.



Once Asbert had finished watching the Paffuto delegation deliver its message to the king, Salomon came up to him and whispered in his ear, “Your Highness, do you have a moment?”

“What is it?”

“It’s a matter best not mentioned here. May we speak in your office?” Although the delegation from Paffuto had left, several ministers and nobles still lingered in the room, Duke Martino among them. Salomon, who had kept a good eye on the situation for the last year and a half without ever commenting on it, did not want this news reaching the Duke’s ears.

Asbert and Salomon briskly retreated back to Asbert’s office.

“Now, what is it?” Asbert demanded. “Do we have a problem with the welcome ceremony?”

“In some sense of the word,” Salomon confessed. Without any hesitation, he continued. “I saw Miss Claire in the palace earlier.”

For a moment, time seemed to stop for Asbert. His gaze dropped to the floor, and he slapped a hand over his forehead before looking back up at Salomon with an expression of utter disbelief. “Are you pulling a joke? We heard she went missing at the way station in Iias the night she left the Academy. Even the Martinos were unable to find her when they looked.”

“She claimed to be a part of the delegation from Paffuto. She bore a watch with the Paffuto royal coat of arms on it.”

“What could that mean?” Asbert wondered. “At any rate, send word to the Duke now.”

“As you wish, Your Highness, but what is to be done about *her*?” Salomon asked. It was rare of him to question Asbert’s orders like this.

“Charlotte often says she misses Claire, doesn’t she? I’m sure she’ll be happy to see her sister again.”

“I suppose,” Salomon said. He feigned innocence as he continued, “Although, Miss Claire may have a different opinion. I apologize for my impropriety, but I must comment on this. It appears to me that, over the past several years, your judgment on how best to act in relation to both Miss Charlotte and Miss Claire has grown lacking. As your retainer, I did not oppose you breaking off your engagement with Miss Claire and sending your attentions to Miss Charlotte as, naturally, the Martinos’ strong power is crucial for Noston.”

“Naturally. And where is the harm in extending my hand to help a poor girl who has spent all her life crying in her sister’s shadow?”

“The harm is that in doing so, Your Highness, you left Miss Claire with nowhere to go. Was it necessary to break her engagement, deprive her of both her rooms and position as head of the student council, and brand her as a disgrace? Now she returns, having built enough power for herself to come bearing the crest of the royal family of Paffuto. Do you not fear that the prince of Paffuto will rain wrath down upon the man who forced her to fall? I have not come to plead on her behalf, but, Your Highness, I beg you to think of your kingdom.”

Then Salomon added in a whisper, “Furthermore...I cannot so easily accept that a girl like Charlotte would allow herself to be tormented by her half sister.”

Only just before, Asbert had reacted harshly to any who spoke ill of Charlotte. Noble girls who gossiped about her lack of manners found themselves expelled, and any who leveled open criticism about her unladylike, freewheeling nature incurred the wrath of the prince. However, as Charlotte had not whispered any honeyed words in Asbert’s ears for some time, the prince did not react to Salomon’s counsel with fury. If anything, it rather surprised him how much he agreed.

Asbert remained silent for a moment and then finally said, “If she is a member of the delegation party as she claims, then surely they must be waiting for the right opportunity to present her. Let us wait a little longer and see how this plays out.”

“As you command, Your Highness.”

At the tea party the following afternoon, Vik found himself sharing a table with several ministers as well as the King of Noston, Prince Asbert, and Duke Martino.

This man is Claire's father, Vik thought to himself as he eyed the duke sitting diagonally across from him.

Benjamin caught his eye and took this as permission to strike up a conversation with the neighboring prince. "You've grown into quite a fine young man, Your Highness."

"Thank you," said Vik. "I've met your son, the Lord Oscar, once before at an official ceremony in Paffuto, but it has been far too long since I've made your lordship's acquaintance."

One of the ministers, impressed at Vik's memory, asked, "Oh, do you remember his son?"

"But of course," Vik said. "I would always remember such an eminent person."

Interestingly, Vik meant what he'd said. Oscar had visited Paffuto with a delegation a few years prior, and although he and the prince spoke but little, Vik was left with a good impression of him.

"I have a daughter as well," Benjamin said, deciding to jump into business. "Her name is Charlotte, if it pleases Your Highness, and she is the fiancée of our Prince Asbert. She tells me that she would love to have an opportunity to speak with you to learn more about you. Do let me have the honor of presenting her to you at tonight's ball."

A startled Asbert choked on his tea. Neither Salomon, standing expressionlessly behind him, nor Vik, sitting at his elbow with a smile, reacted. Between coughs, Asbert croaked out, "Your Grace, Miss Charlotte was not invited to tonight's event..."

"I spoke with His Majesty earlier, and he kindly granted her the right to go. As your future wife, she should have the experience of appearing together with you in public, but she has had precious little opportunities to do so," Benjamin replied.

The king likewise nodded and smiled.

Crestfallen, Asbert murmured, “Very well.” The prospect of spending another evening with Charlotte glued to his arm, filling his ear with inane chatter, made him feel faint. More importantly, he knew he needed to play the role of escort for this very important guest, Prince Vik, and his chief concern was whether or not Charlotte understood this as well. *At the time, I thought she was suitable to be my queen consort, but now that I consider it with more of a clear head, I can see that she’s not cut out for public appearances,* he thought.

Meanwhile, Vik kept the smile plastered to his face and, neither agreeing to nor denying Benjamin’s request, asked, “Do you only have the one daughter, Your Grace?”

“Yes, well, in a sense.” Benjamin paused before continuing. “Frankly, I also had an older daughter, but an unfortunate tragedy befell her, and she has gone missing.”

“My goodness,” said Vik. *An unfortunate tragedy befell her? Really?* he added in his head.

Keith, standing guard behind him, noticed the anger creeping into Vik’s voice and murmured quietly, “You must be getting tired, Your Highness. Shall we step out for a short break?”

“Stand back, Keith,” Vik spat.

Then, judging the timing to be right, he said, “Speaking of fiancées, I also have an engagement I plan to formally announce soon.”

The king smiled. “Why, congratulations.”

“And who is the lucky young lady?” Asbert asked. Despite his facade of curiosity for politeness’s sake, his mind was still too preoccupied with worries about bringing Charlotte to the ball to truly care much for the issue of Vik’s betrothed.

A dead silence fell over the salon as everyone strained to hear Vik’s next words. “I hear her father is actually a duke from this very country.”

Then the place erupted with voices. “What did he say?” a minister cried.

“Is that true?”

“I haven’t heard of such arrangements between any of our dukes and the Paffish royal family!”

Asbert alone among the guests understood who this could be. *That explains why she had a watch with the royal family’s crest on it*, he thought. He and Salomon exchanged startled glances, knowing that they were both thinking the same thing.

“And her name,” said Vik, “is Claire.”

The room exploded once more.

“In terms of her lineage,” Vik added, “she comes from the Martino family. Surely you know her?”

“Claire?” Benjamin spluttered, unable to fully grasp what was going on. “But how? Why?”

“I thought to announce it at the ball tonight before my coronation in the spring, so I had her brought along with me on this trip to meet the company. Well, even though all the company here already knows her.” Vik smiled as he said this, but the smile did not reach his eyes.

Everyone in the salon knew that Claire had once been Asbert’s fiancée and that he had swapped her for Charlotte in an unceremonious fashion.

Benjamin’s comments had filled Vik with fury which now poured out of his mouth as icy cold vitriol. Because all in attendance knew what was about to happen next, the salon fell silent once more.

“We had an omen a few months ago of a magical tornado forming in Paffuto,” Vik began.

Everyone froze. Salomon, judging that it would be considered rude not to respond, broke the silence and said, “Yes, Your Highness. There was much talk here about how it was dealt with before it became anything more than an omen.”

“It was purified, thank you very much—and by Claire, no less.”

“What nonsense are you talking about?” Benjamin cried. His retainers rushed

to stop him, but they could not prevent the duke from expressing his true thoughts. “She’s terrible at magic! There must be some mistake. There is no way my disgrace of a daughter could have done such a thing.”

Keith stepped in front of the stubbornly insisting Duke Martino to bar his way, a smile plastered onto his face. Lui hovered behind both him and Vik, watching attentively to make sure the situation didn’t escalate further.

“Your Grace,” Vik said, “your daughter has suffered a terrible injustice, and in her exile from her homeland, she still has not said *one* bad word about any of you here. Claire is my fiancée. Your daughter or no, I strongly recommend that you do not say anything to hurt her when you see her again tonight.”

Though he spoke to Benjamin, Vik’s eyes were on Asbert. Asbert looked away and kept silent.

As Vik and the knights returned to their quarters after the tea party, Lui questioned Vik. Her words carried a tone of mild exasperation not reflected on her face. “What happened to asking his permission to marry her?”

“She makes a good point,” Denis sighed. “Who knows what’ll happen now that you’ve gone and picked a fight with him? Here I thought we’d have a nice little drink of tea and a little chitty-chat celebrating your upcoming marriage, but now you’ve made me a ball of nerves! I need to go find a cute girl to help wash this bad taste out of my mouth.”

“Shut up,” Vik told him. “Look, I screwed up, okay? I’ll do a better job at the ball tonight.” Vik regretted letting his personal feelings ruin this official matter.

Walking behind the other three, Keith, ever the honest one, couldn’t hide the shock on his face. “I stepped in,” he explained, “due to my...position, I suppose, but what I really wanted to do was punch Claire’s father in the face.”

“Good,” said Lui. “Do that. Maybe it’d serve as a wake-up call.”

“Oh good, you agree?” Denis asked.

“Of course I do. Claire’s father is clearly under some kind of spell, but whoever cast it doesn’t know what they’re doing. Still, if the spell’s target is jealous of Claire, I’m sure that jealousy is enough for the magic to do its work.”

“Jealousy,” Keith muttered, looking more shocked than ever. “You think he’s jealous of his own daughter?”

“Claire was the pride of the Martinos, wasn’t she?” Vik said with a disgruntled look that seemed almost sad. “I’m sure there are more than a few people who resented her for growing up with such a hopeful future.” Then he switched gears. “Anyway, let’s focus on the ball. Lui, I’d like you and the maids to do everything in your combined power to make Claire as radiant as she can be.”

“Leave it to me,” Lui boasted.

Presently, Claire was conducting her own preparations for the ball. Vik had ordered the maids to give her the best possible treatment, so they devoted painstaking attention to every part of her from her head to her toes. Claire was no stranger to this sort of beautification, and as such, the process went smoothly.

Tonight’s dress was the same one Isabella had gifted her for Vik’s ball, but it had been retailored into a mermaid dress without any of the lace. Vik had wanted her to have a completely new dress, but Claire firmly vetoed the idea, insisting that the money spent on that would be better suited to helping their people. She liked the simple style more and thought it brought out her natural beauty even further.

Once she was dressed, the maids did up Claire’s hair and covered it with precious jewels. Then she was ready for the ball. She allowed herself to sigh in relief.

Suddenly, there was a knock on the door. Looking at her watch, she saw that it was already time to go. *I hear I’ll have to see Asbert and my father at the ball. And, to make matters worse, Charlotte. I’m a little bit scared.*

She put her hand to her chest and took a deep breath, and then the maids led Vik into the room.

Vik cried out in wonder, “You’re gorgeous! You look like a princess.”

Claire giggled, but his compliment reminded her of Charlotte saying the very same thing back when they were children. *I can never return to those days,* she

thought, *but now I am in a position where I have a home and people who truly care for me.*

She turned to Vik, brimming with confidence, and smiled at him. “So,” she asked, “shall we go?”

The ballroom erupted into whispers the moment Claire floated in on Vik’s arm.

“Is that her?” someone whispered.

“Prince Asbert’s ex-fiancée?”

“Is it *really* her?”

The buzz spreading throughout the room made Claire want to cover her ears, and her light grip on Vik’s arm tightened. Noticing this, he laid his free hand on top of hers, looked into her eyes, and gave her a gentle nod. Claire met Vik’s gaze and smiled back at him.

The view of this was so touching, as beautiful as a painting, that at once the crowd changed from muttering about the amusing scandal to admiring and sighing over the happy couple.

Vik snorted derisively at their actions. “You’ll likely have to see Prince Asbert tonight,” he told Claire. “I’m sure it must be nerve-racking, but will you be all right to do so?”

“Yes,” Claire replied. She steeled herself and made her smile as bright as it could be. “In fact, I do hope to see him.”

Though the crowd noisily fawned over Claire and Vik, Charlotte was too busy enduring a lecture from Salomon at the far end of the ballroom to notice their arrival.

“Listen to me, Miss Charlotte,” Salomon reprimanded. “The guests of honor tonight are the Prince of Paffuto and his fiancée. You are of lower rank than them, so you must not speak unless you are spoken to. Again, today, not everything is about you. The only thing you are permitted to do is stand next to Prince Asbert and smile. Miss Charlotte, are you even listening to me?”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever,” she said, turning to Asbert. “Come on, Your Highness, let’s go see the prince. I really want to talk to him!” Charlotte had yet to hear that Claire was Vik’s fiancée and quite happily let every one of Salomon’s words go in one ear and out another. *Who cares if he has a fiancée?* she thought. *That’s what my white magic is for.*

Asbert shot Charlotte a look. “I see they’ve arrived,” he said. “Come, let’s go.”

“Goody, let’s!”

Lui noticed Charlotte’s approach and signaled Keith and Denis with her eyes.

“You have got to be *kidding* me,” Denis muttered. “Really? I can tell from where I’m standing that she’s pumping out love spells at max power.”

“She doesn’t seem very well trained,” Lui remarked with a steely expression. She didn’t know what Charlotte was trying to do, but she knew that whatever it was wouldn’t be powerful enough to affect Claire, Vik, and the knights. What scared her more was the possibility of Charlotte flying into a frenzy and attacking Claire.

Claire also noticed Asbert and Charlotte coming over. Vik gently took her hand in his own.

Then, the moment Charlotte met Vik, she did exactly as Salomon had warned her not to. “Claire?” she gasped. “What is *she* doing here?” Her eyes widened, and her mouth hung open in disbelief.

Claire did not answer and only smiled as she waited for Asbert to present Charlotte to her.

“Your Highness, Miss Claire,” Asbert acknowledged his guests. “It is an honor to have you here this evening. May I introduce you to...my fiancée, Miss Charlotte Martino?”

“I am the Crown Prince of Paffuto, Vik William Paffstant. I’ve heard...much about you, Miss Charlotte. Let me introduce you to my fiancée, Miss Claire Martino.”

Claire took Asbert’s hand and dipped into an elegant curtsy. The other guests, watching this fated pairing from a distance, murmured in appreciation.

“Claire and I met half a year ago at the way station in Iias,” Vik explained, “and she accompanied me home to Wurtz. I am in Noston’s debt for having met my lady love in this fine country.” Though his voice was cheerful enough, every one of his words was chosen for its cutting edge.



“I could have sworn she was gone!” Charlotte blurted out, unable to believe her eyes. The words that poured out of her mouth betrayed a side of her she wanted no one to see. “Why is she back? And engaged to the Prince of Paffuto, no less!”

“Hush, Charlotte,” Asbert snapped in a stern tone.

“Oh, did I say that out loud?” Charlotte suddenly remembered where she was and hurried to cover her slipping mask with an innocent smile. “C-Claire! It’s no fair that you’re going to marry the Prin—I mean, congratulations! I’m so happy for you.”

Her composure regained, Charlotte stepped forward and addressed Vik. “Oh, Your Highness, you wouldn’t believe how much I’ve longed to meet you! Please, after the ball is over, do let’s meet for wine and dessert in my room. I’d love to hear tales of Paffuto from you!”

Behind them, Denis snickered at this very unladylike suggestion; Lui, remaining impassive, kicked him in the shin.

Vik made no response, so Charlotte pressed further. “Did you know that your fiancée is actually my older sister? I was so heartbroken when she vanished earlier this year. Claire, I’ve been ever so lonely without you!” She began to sniffle with tears.

Is she really behaving like this in public? Claire thought. Perhaps Asbert hasn’t hired anyone to teach her what it means to be a queen.

Concerned, she gave Charlotte her handkerchief and said in a low voice, “It’s lovely to see you again, Charlotte, but do calm down. One should speak no more than is necessary at these sorts of functions.”

“You’re always saying that!” Charlotte grouched. “This is the first time we’ve seen each other in months, and now you’re being horrid to me again? Why do you like tormenting me so much?” Claire had spoken quietly so as not to embarrass either Asbert or his fiancée, but Charlotte wailed at the top of her lungs.

Suddenly Claire’s memories of how she had fled the Academy and how Charlotte had cried on the other side of the door under Caroline’s protective

wing came back. At last, she discovered the anger which had been slumbering in her all along.

But before she could do anything, the prince snapped, “You are being a disgrace.” Only—it wasn’t her prince. It was Asbert, the very same prince who’d done nothing but fawn over Charlotte for so long. Claire couldn’t believe her ears.

“Step back,” he commanded. “You have already tarnished Noston’s reputation enough, and I will not allow this to proceed any further.”

“Your Highness?” Confused, Charlotte paused in her dramatic efforts to ingratiate herself with Vik and stared at Asbert in dismay.

“Did you not hear me?” Asbert demanded in a voice so frigid as to make her go numb. “Leave us at once.”

“But why me?” Charlotte asked. “Claire was the one who was bullying me! Why are you taking her side? This shouldn’t be...possible.” She fled the room, bawling tears forced out in an effort to win sympathy.

Is this who Charlotte really is? Asbert wondered. How have I never noticed before now? As he watched her go, Salomon’s words—You left Miss Claire with nowhere to go—echoed in his mind. What have I done? Asbert thought.

He turned to Vik and Claire and bowed his head. “My apologies,” he said.

Claire gasped. The crown prince! Bowing to her, of all people? Flustered, she rushed to say, “Your Highness, many people are watching. Please, you needn’t bow to me.”

“No, I am not only apologizing for her behavior.” Asbert paused. “I apologize for everything I have done to you. As your prince, I think I have no other choice but to sacrifice my dignity now.”

True, Charlotte had indeed taken many things from Claire, but what good was an apology now? The past was over and done with, and she cared little for those old wounds now.

Vik looked at Asbert, standing there with his head bowed, and waited a moment before saying, “You’ve had the honor of Claire’s acquaintance for

some time now, have you not? Do you think Claire delights in having you prostrate yourself before her?”

“No, but I—”

Vik interrupted him. “From my perspective, Claire possesses all the qualities of a noble queen. Not only is she wise beyond her years and fair as the day is long, but she also keeps her people ever at the forefront of her mind, and she possesses all the requisite talents to help them. Noston must be a beautiful kingdom, indeed, if it can produce such fine young ladies as her. It brings her no joy to see her homeland fall into decline or its royalty lose its pride.”

“Your Highness, he’s right. Do please stand up straight,” Claire urged.

At their combined coaxing, Asbert straightened up, but just then—

“Claire!” Benjamin shouted.

Upon hearing her father’s voice, Claire jumped. She turned, and there stood the King of Noston and Duke Martino in front of Charlotte, who sobbed into Claire’s handkerchief. She must have gone running to them in tears after Asbert rebuked her and banished her from the room, Claire reasoned.

Vik moved to block Claire from Benjamin’s light of sight. She had never once exchanged words with the king herself, but she knew him to be a dignified, mild-mannered man adept at maintaining a balanced kingdom. However, the man standing before her showed not a trace of that gentle manner. *Something’s wrong*, she thought. Bewildered, she tightened her grip on Vik’s elbow.

The king brazenly looked the two up and down and decreed, “The crown of Noston forbids this marriage.”

“What do you mean?” Vik cried. *Has it really come to this?* he wondered. He had indeed considered the possibility that the king might not allow their marriage, for in a country as small as Noston, a single powerful individual in the royal family could drastically alter the state of affairs both at home and abroad. However, Vik had gambled on the proud old king not recognizing the true value of this diamond in the rough he had already thrown away once. But now that Charlotte was weaving her tangled webs behind the scenes, the equation came

out far different than he'd anticipated.

"That young lady is the pride and joy of Noston's Martino family," the king decreed, "and I cannot grant you her hand in marriage so readily."

"Claire, I am most displeased that you ran off and caused all this trouble," Benjamin said in turn.

Vik glared at both men contemptuously, all light of friendship gone from his eyes. Claire judged that there was no recovering from this turn of events and spoke up. "It is an honor to make your acquaintance again once more, Your Majesty and Your Grace."

"Young lady, that man is your father. Why do you not refer to him as such?" The king had known Claire since she was a child, but he had never once seen her stand up for herself.

Act like a lady, Claire thought, rallying herself. "Your Majesty, Paffuto's talented mages outnumber those of Noston. Likewise, its army and resources eclipse Noston's by several orders of magnitude. What good do you suppose it will do you to try to deter me here? Moreover, I am afraid that I cannot simply call on my magical powers whenever it proves convenient for Your Majesty. And above all else, is it not important for our two kingdoms to live in harmony with one another?"

"W-Well," the king stammered. Both he and Benjamin fell silent, understanding that Claire was implying that, should she be forced to stay in Noston, she would refuse to use her powers in service of the kingdom.

Charlotte must have put them up to this, Vik thought, relieved, as he saw the king falter, *but she isn't powerful enough to stop Claire*.

"What?" Charlotte, having failed to learn her lesson, whined. "But father, you promised! You said I could switch my fiancée for Claire's, father!"

"Charlotte, that is enough; cease this at once," Benjamin commanded.

"No! Father, I want to be with a *cool* prince! I want to be with him, the one everyone talks about!"

"I truly apologize for her behavior," Asbert groaned. Just as he was about to

bow again, Charlotte scowled, her face morphed wickedly due to losing the constant affection normally aimed in her direction. An intense flash of white light erupted from her.

That's her magic, Claire understood intuitively. Just then, she remembered her conversation with Lui in Iias. *I'll need to put a ward up on Vik when we arrive at the palace.*

His ward! Claire thought. She spun around just as Lui began casting a spell of her own. Charlotte's light illuminated the ballroom like daytime for only a brief instant before it streamed towards Lui and absorbed into her person. Lui then gasped and staggered forward, one leg collapsing out from under her.

"Lui!" Claire cried. She and Denis both ran to Lui while Keith drew his sword and darted to stand protectively before Vik.

Vik glared at the king, his eyes possessed of a frightful intellect. "I believe I am owed an explanation for what just occurred, Your Majesty." Claire had never before heard him so furious.

"What...just happened?" murmured a stunned Charlotte between gasps for breath. "My spell...was canceled!"

With a flash of realization, the King of Noston blanched. In a trembling voice, he ordered, "Guards, seize her!"

"Hey, what do you think you're doing?" Charlotte cried. "Why me?! Father! Tell them to let me go!"

The guards surrounded her and bore her away.

Denis cradled Lui in his arms, and Claire gripped her hand tightly. "Lui," she said, but Lui was unconscious and made no move to respond. Her face was pale and bloodless.

"I think she used up all of her magic power and overextended herself," Denis muttered, looking frantic as sweat trickled down his cheeks. "We need to get her back to a powerful holy woman in Paffuto as soon as possible because the longer we wait, the worse her chances will be."

"We leave at once," Vik ordered. "See to the preparations, Keith."

“As you command,” Keith shouted over his shoulder, already sprinting away.

However, in spite of Vik’s decree, an immediate homecoming simply wasn’t possible. Pushing the horses continuously without rest would still require two full days to reach Paffuto. Judging from the horrified look on Denis’s face, Claire understood even that much would be far too long.

“Vik,” she said, “if you have any messages for Keith, you should leave them behind with Asbert now.”

“What do you mean?” he asked.

Claire ignored him and instead turned to Asbert. “Your Highness, I’m afraid we must bid you farewell, but I would like to entrust the well-being of Keith and all of our guards to you. Please, for all the friendship we’ve shared, will you make sure that they come home safely?”

“O-Of course,” he spluttered, startled by the forcefulness of her words and the purpose in her eyes. “Yet what are you—”

“Lui doesn’t have any time to waste,” she said. “I’m going to teleport us straight to the royal palace in Paffuto.”

“Over so far a distance?” Vik cried. “That’s impossible! You’re incredible, Claire, but that’s too much even for you.”

“If all four of us pool our magic, then I’m sure we’ll just barely be able to make it.” She began channeling her magic to the surface of her body as she spoke.

Denis grabbed Claire’s arm. “I don’t have much,” he said, “but use it well.” His emotions flowed into her along with his magic, forcing her to grit her teeth.

To the palace, she thought. To where the holy woman is. “Oh spirits,” she chanted, “in exchange for our power, I beseech you to ferry us to our destination.” A beautiful glimmer rose up around them.

“I can’t believe it,” Asbert breathed, sinking to his knees in awe. “She’s actually doing it.”

Then all four vanished without a trace.

Three hours later, Claire went to the castle chapel to see the holy woman.

“Hello, Lady Claire,” the holy woman said.

“Hello, madam,” answered Claire. “How is Lui?”

“Still unconscious, I fear. She overextended herself, so she will not wake for some time. Truly, it is a miracle she even made it home alive.”

Claire smiled weakly, enough to convey her thanks, and then hung her head in defeat. They had rushed Lui to the holy woman just moments after teleporting back to Paffuto, yet Lui’s life still hung in limbo. The spell Lui had used was not intended to reflect her opponent’s magic, but rather to absorb it all and neutralize it within her own body. Had she allowed it to ricochet off of her, the magical energy could have harmed someone else. In that moment, Lui had thought of her kingdom and chosen to sacrifice herself for it, and the very thought of it all broke Claire’s heart.

Oh, Lui... Claire thought. She knelt next to the bed of the unconscious girl and took Lui’s hand between her own. As she did, she recalled what Vik had told her just a few moments before in his office.

“After you teleported us away, the King of Noston promised he’d release Keith and the guards only if we sent you back to Noston in their stead. We have reports that Prince Asbert tried to oppose his father by mobilizing his personal guard and making for Fort Flatten. I believe that they’ve arrived at their destination safely, but,” he paused regretfully, “this is all my fault. Now the relations between our two nations are horribly tense, and rumors are circulating of a coup brewing in Noston against the king.”

“Lui is safe,” Vik went on to say, “but she will continue to live with the aftereffects even once she has recovered, which unfortunately means she cannot return to her old life. Her father has always been opposed to her living as knight, on the grounds that she is a woman, so she may be forced to leave the palace.”

The kingdom I love is ruined, Claire thought, all because of me. If only I could somehow turn back the clock to a time before all my happiness was ruptured. Tears filled her eyes and threatened to spill over, and then suddenly she remembered.

Wait, Minami, have you not played Asbert's route yet? I made you a save and everything.

No, for some reason, I just don't feel like playing it.

That's it! Claire thought. She was in a game world. "What would happen if I started over with a new save and went back to before I was fifteen?" The first time she had ever been spirited away to that other world was the night she had fled the Royal Aristocratic Academy. Therefore, that event was probably the impetus for this world straying from the game's scripted story. The second occurrence had happened after her baptism on Lindel Island, and the third was when she purified the tornado. Which meant—

"Whenever I use up too much magic and faint, I stand a high chance of ending up in Minami's room," she conjectured aloud.

These past six months had been the most rich and adventurous of Claire's life, and to lose all of those wonderful experiences would wound her so badly she didn't think she could handle it. However, there was nothing more important to her than her beloved friends here in Paffuto, so she didn't have to think twice before making her decision.

That evening, Claire invited Vik and Denis to her room for a tea party, although it was "tea" in name only. Tonight's beverages consisted of wine and numerous varieties of expensive liquor. She rounded off the refreshments with Vik's beloved cheddar cheese sandwiches and a selection of Denis's favorite nuts.

"Vik got mad and was just *awful* at the tea party in Noston," Denis said. "I'm never traveling with him again."

"And I could do with never having a tea party like that again in my life," said Vik.

"I wish I could have seen the confrontation between you and my father," Claire lamented.

The three joked and laughed together in an attempt to forget about the two missing members of the group, talking about fun vacations, school, Denis's

favorite bars, Keith's scary older sister, and so on.

Finally, after two hours of merriment, the tea party drew to a close. As Vik and Denis rose to return to their own rooms, Claire saw them to the door and said, "Thank you both very much for coming today." She hesitated and then added, "Do take care from now on, won't you?"

Vik looked puzzled. "Why'd you phrase it like that? Aren't I seeing you again tomorrow?"

She faltered once more and then said, "I suppose you are. Good night, gentlemen." Then she closed the door with a smile.

Claire wished she could have watched them walk away down the corridor, but she knew that spending any more time with her dear companions would only weaken her resolve. Instead, she stepped to the window, threw it open, and looked out at the beautiful moon. *I swear I'll return to this someday*, she thought. Then, just as planned, she summoned the magic in her body, paying acute attention to channeling every last bit of her strength.

"Oh spirits," she chanted, "I beseech you to use up all of my magic to purify this world and give it your blessing!"

The moon was eclipsed by a light even brighter and more gorgeous than itself. As the world exploded in brilliance and Claire's vision began to dim, a prickling doubt nibbled at the back of her mind. Something was off, but she didn't know what—but before she could figure it out, she sank into unconsciousness.

Oh yes, Claire had forgotten something very important indeed. Namely, that she still shared Dion Mead's magic.

When she came to, she found herself lying atop Minami's thin mattress. The bedroom was dark and absent of Riko.

"I did it," Claire told herself. "I made it here successfully." She looked at the clock and saw that it wasn't yet 5 a.m. She rose from the bed and sat down before the game console and attached monitor. Everything had been so confusing on all of her visits to Minami's world before, but now her head was clear. She had all her wits about her and understood exactly why she had come

here.

She wasted no time in booting the game up and arriving at the save data screen for *Upstart: Eternal Love*. Just then, it hit her what the title of the game implied. “Upstart,” she said. “Charlotte is the player character of this game, isn’t she? So maybe it’s the game’s fault that Charlotte is the way she is.” *Which means that she’s the game’s victim, really,* Claire added to herself. *I can’t imagine that she’d act like such a bitch otherwise.* This last impression was courtesy of Minami, not Claire.

Now, finally, Claire understood the oddity of Charlotte’s position. *So that must mean that...* she thought, “above all else, the most important measure to protect the future is to change Charlotte’s personality.” With that, she formed a plan of action for what she’d do after going back in time to before her fifteenth birthday. First, she had to ensure that Charlotte wouldn’t end up such a nasty individual. Second, she would see to it that she was expelled from the Noston Royal Aristocratic Academy, as had happened before. “Because if I’m expelled,” she told herself, “then I can meet Vik and everyone again in Iias. It’ll work out. So long as I do my best.”

It’ll work out, she thought. *Just you wait and see!* Then, filled with determination, she loaded the save file.

Extra Story

On the day that Claire used her teleportation magic to send everyone home from Noston, she'd been bombarded by a perfect storm of emotions, with everything from frustration to guilt all mixed together. However, she refused to let herself cry. Normally, Lui would be around to dry her tears like it was the most natural thing in the world, but, of course, Lui was gone. That cruel reality broke Claire's heart yet again. Exhausted, she fell into a deep sleep, wherein she had a peculiar dream.

An old, familiar voice called out to her. "Claire," it said, faintly at first, and then grew louder. "Claire!" It was her grandmother's voice, the same voice that had read books to her in the sunshine as a child.

However, Claire's vision was too vague and blurry to make anyone or anything out, no matter how much she tried to focus. It was as if a soft, dim film of light had been draped over everything around her.

"Grandma?" she called back. "Is that you?" Her voice came out faint and was swallowed up by the light.

"You've had a hard time of it, my dear," came her grandmother's voice. "And you have a hard road ahead of you, so I have sent you a pleasant dream to ease the way."

"A pleasant...dream?" Claire repeated.

"Yes. Fear not, my dear. I promise that one day you will attain this happiness in the real world. And when you do, you will find that it is far, far more pleasant than any dream."

Then with that, color rapidly rushed back into the world around her. Suddenly, Claire found herself standing on a deep crimson carpet beneath a sparkling chandelier. She heard a rush of noise and saw all the familiar furnishings of her childhood. And there, next to her, was Vik. Claire understood

at once that this dream took place right before that dreadful catastrophe.

Vik studied Claire, concern writ into his clear, emerald eyes. "Are you all right?" he asked.

Claire didn't feel nervous in the slightest. She realized that she must have been somewhat dazed up until now, but Vik's presence exerted a subconscious pressure on her to focus.

"Yes," she said.

"You'll likely have to see Prince Asbert tonight. I'm sure it must be nerve-racking, but will you be all right to do so?"

Claire was just about to answer as she had in real life: "Yes. In fact, I do hope to see him," when another familiar voice called her name. She spun around in surprise. "Aunt Anne!"

There stood her aunt. Anne had been the only one to take Claire's side after she fell from grace, which unfortunately led to Anne becoming a black sheep to the rest of the family as well. Yet, in Anne's constant kindness and impartiality, Claire found her savior.

Once Anne finished paying her respects to Vik, she turned to Claire with a grin and lifted a bottle. "You know," she said, "I just finished passing around this champagne for tonight's ball."

"Aunt Anne, what is that?" Claire asked.

"Something that you two don't need," Anne said. "Although Benjamin and the king must drink more of it."

Claire tilted her head in confusion, but Anne only smiled meaningfully back. Then she added, "I do apologize for...not being able to make it in time today. Still, I hope you enjoy this dream."

Just as Anne had hoped, the dream turned out to be quite pleasant. Asbert still did bow and apologize to Claire, but none of the things Claire had misgivings about afterwards came true. After Asbert chastised Charlotte for her behavior before Vik, she ran off in tears and did not return. The king offered

words of congratulation for their upcoming wedding, and Benjamin's eyes grew misty with tears, as if whatever malice that had once possessed him was now gone.

"Claire, it's time to go see Madam Jo. Are you ready to leave?" Lui called through the door of Claire's room in Paffuto.

"Yes, of course!" Claire called back. *Oh yes, she reminded herself with a little shake of her head to clear it. I graduated from the Wurtz Royal Academy last year, but now I take lessons with Madam Jo to prepare for being the queen.* Although she was aware that this was just a dream, Claire took a moment to gather her bearings. Now, just a little over half a year since the ball in Noston, she had graduated and shifted her efforts towards preparations for becoming the queen in earnest.

"I had to stop by the Academy for an errand today," Lui said as they walked to Madam Jo's quarters. "And guess what? Isabella Reine has received an award for her high academic achievement."

Without meaning to, Claire stopped in her tracks. "Truly?" she cried.

"Yes. Isn't she the girl you tutored when you were a governess?"

"Yes indeed! She was ever so smart and worked hard on every single thing she tried. Her mother told me that her dream is to someday become a lady-in-waiting at the palace."

"Really now?" said Lui. "Well, that could very well come true, and sooner rather than later."

"Oh, I'd simply love for her to come be my lady-in-waiting! That would make me ever so happy." Claire blushed, self-conscious, as she resumed walking alongside Lui. Even after she had left the Reines' mansion to come live at the palace, she and Isabella still sent one another letters, and Claire liked to visit the Reines whenever she had the time. The baron was over the moon about her upcoming wedding and promised to send her and Vik quite the wedding present. Although Duke Benjamin had granted Vik leave to marry Claire, her relationship with her father still felt stilted and awkward, so the Reines had become like a second family to her.

Still, Isabella's wish to become a lady-in-waiting was one that, Claire gathered, she was in no way supposed to know about. It was a matter of much pride for Isabella, as she wanted to achieve the position completely under her own steam and surprise her onetime governess whom she so admired. The baron and baroness had requested that Claire never tell that she'd known of the wish as far back as the night of Vik's ball, so Claire worked with all her might to support Isabella in her studies while still acting like she was none the wiser.

Isabella still has another three years of school, Claire thought. I'll have to do my best to finish my queen training by then as well!

Presently, Claire's lessons focused primarily on topics such as Paffish history and geography. Fortunately, she had been learning most other subjects, like foreign languages of the kingdoms across the sea and manners expected of royalty, since she was but a girl, so she currently had little room for improvement in those departments. Madam Jo, the king's aunt, claimed that Claire was an excellent pupil, and these combined factors meant that her education was proceeding quite rapidly.

"What are you studying today?" Lui asked as Keith, following behind them, began to stretch.

"How the Marquis Spencer governs his lands," Claire explained.

Keith, the aforementioned Marquis Spencer, spluttered mid-stretch.

When the day was finished, Claire had time to relax after dinner, and this evening, Vik and all of the knights piled into her room to goof off and giggle together.

"Now even Claire's doing it," Vik pointed out. "Keith, Claire was making fun of you because you take your duties too seriously all the time."

"Claire, I apologize for being a man with no sense of humor," Keith said.

He looked so truly dejected that Claire, who hadn't meant it as a joke in the first place, hurried to say, "Oh, no, not at all! I really did learn about your management system today. You've had great success in governing your people and undertaking all sorts of business reforms, so I learned quite a bit."

Keith flat-out refused to drink whenever Vik came to Claire's room, as he took the duty of protecting his wild young master quite seriously. Vik took out his anger at not being allowed to have alone time with his fiancée by teasing his retainer-cum-elder brother figure more than was strictly necessary.

"Keith," he said, "you're lucky Claire's so kind. But I'm not amused at all."

Keith looked pained but finally said after a moment's pause, "I get the point, Your Highness. But three minutes only." Grudgingly, he picked up an hourglass, seeming to have guessed what was frustrating his master so.

"Come on, can't you cut me some slack for once?" Vik whined. "We can't do anything in three minutes."

"You couldn't do anything if you had three *hours*," Denis put in.

"I don't know about that," Lui teased. "I suppose even Vik could make *some* headway if you gave him enough time."

Keith ushered the giggling duo out the door with a "Come on, let's go," and closed it behind them with a heavy thump.

Vik heaved a huge sigh of relief. Surprisingly, the sound of the three knights talking to one another faded away into the distance, indicating that they were giving Vik and Claire some space.

"Hm, I'm guessing maybe they'll give us a half hour," Vik said.

Claire giggled. "Keith is very kind, isn't he?" After all, she reflected, he hadn't turned over the hourglass when he'd taken it with him.

"Claire, would you come sit next to me?" Vik asked.

"Don't we only have three minutes?" Claire asked, looking concerned.

Vik went silent for a moment and then said, "Isn't that enough?"

She obligingly made her way over to him, sat down at his side, and let him lean on her. He nuzzled his face into her soft brown hair.

"That tickles, Vik," she told him. He blew a puff of air at the back of her neck, and a genuine smile stretched across her face. She was now growing her hair back out after having cut it the night she fled Noston, and surely it'd be at a

nice, lovely length by the time of their wedding in a few years. Whether or not she'd like to keep the same hairstyle that she had before was another matter entirely.

To Claire, being in Vik's arms meant being in a place of safety. Although sometimes her heart raced, or she felt that it was hard to breathe, her sense of contentment always won out in the end. To Vik, in a life with such weighty responsibilities, these times spent alone with Claire were the only ones in which he could stretch out and relax, like a cat. Keith must have rewarded Vik with these moments to allow him to decompress.

"Oh!" Claire suddenly cried. "Denis's birthday is almost here. Should we throw another surprise party like we did last year?"

"That's a good idea," said Vik. "How about we borrow the kitchen and bake him a cake with Lui again? I bet he'd love it."

"What a lovely idea. You know, the fact that we can have such good times together...really feels almost like a dream." Steeped in this feeling of happiness, Claire's vision gradually began to blur. She knew morning must not be far off.

She knew that, upon waking, the first thing to do would be visit Lui on her sickbed. Vik would be too busy running messages to various people to have caught a wink of sleep, so Claire would have to do what she could without ending up in his way. Her primary concern rested with Keith, left behind on his own in Noston. She wanted to write a letter to Asbert reminding him that he had promised to secure Keith's safe return, but she also thought that it wouldn't be wise of her to get involved in this situation. Oh, what was Claire to do?

She could still feel Vik's warmth on her arm as her mind raced. The faint, refreshing scent of his cologne lingered in her nose. She was so happy that she could barely breathe, and she never wanted to let this feeling go. She wouldn't. She still had a little more time before she must set this joy free.

Her grandmother's gentle voice echoed in her head. "Fear not, my dear. I promise that one day you will attain this happiness in the real world. And when you do, you will find that it is far, far more pleasant than any dream."

The End

Afterword

Hello. My name is Ichibu Saki. Thank you very much for reading *Formerly, the Fallen Daughter of the Duke*.

I wrote this book because of an off-the-cuff comment from someone who has helped me greatly. One day, when I was chatting with them about my favorite author, they suggested to me, “Why don’t you try writing too?” I cheerfully answered, “Okay!” and went home. That day, I discovered a website called *Shosetsuka ni Naro*—You Can Be an Author—and, for some reason, decided to start posting there. And now here we are.

My decision to start writing was very spur-of-the-moment, but this book is full of my personal interests. I thought about what books I like to read, what plot twists would make me excited, and what kinds of traits I like in strong protagonists. I adore all of the characters—dignified and beautiful Claire; Vik, whose personality still shines through even in the midst of his heavy responsibilities; loyal Keith; Lui, who appears stoic on the outside but is actually a very emotional and kind person; and Denis, the surprisingly thoughtful party boy. As a result, I didn’t intend at all for anyone else to read it and went along my merry way, writing whatever I pleased.

Therefore, I was shocked when I was told that this could be turned into a book. *The editor picked me?! I thought. I’m so thankful!*

This first volume ends on a cliffhanger, and afterwards Claire will work even harder to bring about the future she desires. I hope you will enjoy watching her grow into an even more wonderful young lady than before, with all the kindness and affection she failed to notice during her first time around through life.

Also, this light novel series now has a manga being published with Magcomi. They’ve brought the world and its charming characters to life in a way so far beyond my imagination that it’s become much more than just the kind of story I’d like to read. I’m dying in the good kind of agony every time they update a

new chapter. As a fellow reader, I hope we can all enjoy this manga together.

Lastly, I am very grateful to everyone who helped with the publication of this book. Thank you to everyone who supported me on *Shosetsuka ni Naro*; the illustrator, Nemusuke, for bringing my clumsy imaginings to life; my editor, who taught me about the role of a villain; and everyone else who helped me along in this process.

I can say with a totally straight face that I will remember the happiness these last few months have given me until my dying day.

I hope to see you again in volume 2!

December 2020

Ichibu Saki

Bonus Short Story

Before They Met

One day, the Crown Prince of Paffuto, Vik William Paffstant, set off from the kingdom of Noston. Following a tour of inspection, he was bound for his homeland. Along the way, he and his companions stopped in Iias. The town was a major hub for traffic going through Noston thanks to its way station, and although there was good lodging available just a little further along, the party decided to stop here for the night in order to observe local trade.

“It’s been too long since we’ve been in any place with some real life to it!” exclaimed a cheerful young knight, his hair tousled in a good-natured mess. “Shame we never got around to stopping in Tillard. Hey, does anyone mind if I go off on my own for a bit?”

The taller, huskier knight at his side frowned. “If you’re talking about reconnaissance, it had best wait for another time. His Highness only has us three to guard him on this trip.”

Vik shot the too-serious knight an annoyed look. “It’s not that big of an issue, Keith. Besides, this is part of Denis’s duties.”

“True,” said a third knight. “Unless, what, are you suggesting that my wards aren’t strong enough?”

“Don’t you start ganging up on me too, Lui,” the large knight sighed. He looked to be the eldest of the bunch, yet the others teased him mercilessly.

Lui’s question made Denis momentarily glance down with a flash of brilliant inspiration. He then returned to his usual mellow expression. “Say,” he suggested, “how about we get some dinner in the hotel’s restaurant? I’d be down to have a drink with you guys.”

“Sounds good to me,” said Vik, and the conversation wrapped up tidily.

Having decided on their next course of action, the group of four left the way station and walked down Main Street towards the hotel. The sun had long since set, and the town was festooned with lamps, for despite being only a provincial town, Iias boasted a bustling nightlife. Jovial people passed one another in droves, and the bars and restaurants along Main Street were full to bursting.

Vik drew curious stares from many of the passersby. Naturally, they did not recognize him as the Paffish prince, but his handsome looks alone were enough to attract attention. Vik typically cloaked himself in a noble, unapproachable aura, but he seemed to consciously turn this off when traveling abroad. Although at sixteen years old he was still quite young, he possessed an exceptional sense of perception that made him well-revered as the next heir to the throne.

“By the way, Vik,” Denis said, “have you ever thought about using one of these trips to let your hair down and have some fun?”

“Not at all,” answered Vik. “Although I’m curious what constitutes your definition of having fun.”

Denis suddenly became very interested in something in front of him and refused to meet Vik’s eye. “Oh, you know,” he said. “Nothing much.”

“But you always take yourself so seriously,” said Keith. “I certainly don’t want you to start gallivanting around town, but you’re soon to be marr—rather, soon you’ll need to put some serious effort into finding a bride.”

“True,” Lui agreed, grinning wryly. “Sometimes it’s hard to believe that Vik’s so concerned about doing the right thing, but maybe that’s only because I know Denis too well.”

“But who knows?” Denis said. “Sometimes these things happen right out of the blue without any warning. Maybe today could be the day!”

“Knock it off, Denis,” Keith admonished. “He’s not about to meet the girl of his dreams in Noston of all places.”

Lui chuckled. “That’d only add to the trouble already on your plate, huh, Keith? Sounds like fun to me.”

“Seriously, can you guys give it a rest?” Vik said, interrupting his retainers’

conversation with a deep, world-weary sigh. He hated this particular topic because he understood his own position better than anyone else. As the heir to the throne, it was his duty to select as his bride a lovely young lady with superior intellect, kindness, and, of course, good breeding. It was hard for Vik to be optimistic when he knew he'd have to put aside his own personal happiness and choose a wife based only on her talents and her family's power.

Lui realized their ribbing had gone beyond lighthearted joking and said, "I'm sorry. We went too far."

But Vik wasn't listening. She followed his eyes and saw him staring in befuddlement at a group of three: two men and a girl dressed in fine clothing, probably a young noblewoman. The girl looked to be roughly the same age as Vik, and there was something so strikingly eye-catching about her that passersby, even from a distance, turned their heads just to steal a glance. However, Lui knew that her prince wasn't the type of man to go around ogling girls.

Although the girl and her male companions seemed to be conversing affably enough, Vik had witnessed a momentary expression of panic flit across this young woman's face. Stranger still, her hair seemed as if it had just been cut short, and she was lugging a large trunk with her. Nonetheless, she didn't appear to be in any sort of great emergency, and Lui was just wondering if she should step in when Vik stopped in his tracks.

"Sorry," he said, "I'm going to take a quick walk. You guys go on ahead without me, and I'll catch up later." The declaration was surprisingly stern.

"A walk?" Keith questioned. "Hey, Vik, wait—"

But Vik was already walking away. Keith hadn't noticed the girl and began to grow alarmed, unaware of what had so thoroughly caught his prince's interest.

"Keith," Lui said.

"Lui?"

"I know more or less what's happening, and I think he'll be okay with me watching him. You two go on ahead."

Keith hesitated but then relented. "All right. Make sure he doesn't come to

any harm.”

Vik’s stern tone of voice earlier had made his words a command, and Keith was loath to disobey orders. Thus, he chose to entrust Lui with Vik’s safety.

Just as Lui had predicted, Vik approached the girl and spoke to her. His fine appearance confused the two men, as Vik seemed more fit for a Paffish ball or the royal palace than a street in this little country town. Lui, watching the exchange from a distance, wondered if the girl was a young noblewoman with a troubled backstory, fleeing her family.

Vik rarely, if ever, approached girls like this. He knew full well that his actions would reflect on the entire kingdom of Paffuto, and yet he appeared to be inviting this strange girl to share dinner with them. Amazed at the unexpected turn of events, Lui’s jaw slackened, and she couldn’t help but be reminded of Denis’s words from earlier. “But who knows?” she breathed. “Sometimes these things happen right out of the blue.”

Lui had looked out for Vik like he was her little brother since the two of them were children. To everyone else, Vik was a perfect prince—a solitary figure with no close friends, let alone potential romantic candidates. This was the first time Lui had ever seen Vik’s iron control over his own heart slacken for even a moment. As his retainer, she knew not whether she should express her feelings on the matter, but as his friend, she was overjoyed.

I suppose that for now, she thought, I won’t say anything to them. Vik and the girl were currently talking quite openly, and judging by the expressions on their faces, seemed to be enjoying themselves very much. Once she made sure they had safely reached the hotel doors, Lui teleported herself inside. She had no plans to tell Denis or Keith about what she’d just seen, for she knew that they’d share her joy in just a few moments, even without preamble. Lui allowed herself one secret smile, happy that her dear friend had, indeed, just met the girl of his dreams.



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Formerly, the Fallen Daughter of the Duke: Volume 1

by Ichibu Saki

Translated by Andrew Schubauer Edited by Casey Pritt

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Ebook edition 1.1.0: September 2022

Premium E-Book